

THE  
**DOCTOR-WHO**  
PROJECT

**OUTBOARDS**



Tim Jones

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**Part 1**

*“Doctor,” she said. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.”*

*He looked up from his small, leather armchair and put his book on his lap. “Yes?” His room was small and lightly furnished, quiet and comfortable. A yellow light rippled across the blank wallpaper. “What can I do for you?”*

*She crossed her arms firmly over her chest. “I’m worried about you. Ever since Tamara left, you’ve not been acting right.”*

*“I’m sorry?”*

*“I mean... what happened on Earth. You’re a good friend. But it broke everything you believed in, every law. It wasn’t you.”*

*He sat forward. “I don’t know what you mean, Grae.”*

*“You don’t know what I’m talking about?” she said quickly, her eyebrows rising, her foot hovering over the doorstep. “Fine. Then I’ll refresh your memory.”*

\* \* \* \* \*

The nightmares came like silent, starlit ghosts. Present and correct every time he closed his eyes, they ran to an unforgiving schedule. Night after night as the sun set, the dead would rise from the chalky ashes of his memory and crawl into bed with him.

It was a kind of limbo. Nothing, anywhere, as far as he could see. A vague sensation of floating, rolling past invisible clouds with jagged edges sharp enough to rake his bare flesh and drag him back down. Absolute blackness, as thick and dizzy as the cursing of a drunkard.

Then, an awareness of light. A pinprick in the dark, the sensation of something *more* than the thick fog that obscured the man’s world. A lifting of the veils. As the plug on the void was pulled, reality began to trickle in, presenting the man with –

His laboratory. Long and vast, four walls, a polished gunmetal grey. A gaping domed roof, hewn from solid rock. He’d stood by that table just a few hours ago, stooped in the pose of research. His instruments still scattered across the benches. Lecture notes forming a puddle on the floor. The distant tick of a clock, tapping his dreams into a muddy grave.

He took a silent footstep. His world rippled, like the first swell of a tide hungry for sand, then lay still. Step by tentative step, he continued. He was walking through a freeze-frame. The world was dead, frozen in time. Apart from the odd moment when time would freeze *him* instead, when the scene would suddenly shift, stir, spurt nonsense from the corners of his mind across this poor excuse for truth. His world would flash, flicker – burst to life in a gush of colour. The instruments on the benches would suddenly switch places. Swap to left and right. Fade in and out of existence. Haunt him with their mocking of reality. A reality so familiar, that he saw it every day, yet so, so alien.

A gust of light. Shapes. Half-formed smears like the scratch of chalk over brick. Flinging them through the maelstrom of light. Screaming, baying, echoing over and over, snarls carved into their oily faces. A thin, broken pleading.

*“Help... Help me...”*

He reached out towards the ghosts. Arms bending. Fingers stretching. The light an inch away, a hairsbreadth from safety – then shrinking back, fading, growing ever distant. A metre. Two.

Three.

Out of reach.

Glass would shatter. The sound of a thousand tiny explosions would ring in his ears. Flames would dance from the million specks of glass that peppered the laboratory floor. The cries would grow louder, louder than the silence following a gunshot, louder than the rattling wail of death, until the world itself imploded in a single, undulating din. A din steeped thick in helplessness.

Then, like the centre point of a tidal wave, reality would rush back at him and wrench him screaming to his bed.

Each morning, he would wake to an empty home. His wife was a note in a three year-old edition of the local newspaper, and his son was still missing. The rings around his eyes would be that little bit blacker.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa Roberts sometimes wished that she hadn't followed her vows as a Catholic quite so strongly. That way, she might have discovered the extremity of her husband's snoring *before* marrying him.

A sleepy smile hung from his boyishly handsome face. To wake him up would be rather like kicking a puppy. A wounded puppy, even. Oh well, she thought – there was a time and a place for mercy. Monday morning was not it.

Carl's yelp of surprise was probably audible next-door, as tightly packed together as the houses on her street stood. She shrugged off the immediate prick of guilt – she'd had to lie awake all night with him droning on beside her, so it was only fair for her neighbours to be woken by her retribution.

He flopped over onto one side and regarded her through eyes still adjusting to the concept of being open. "Onto sleep deprivation now, are we? You should know that's banned under international law."

"I'm sure history will vindicate me," she muttered, gathering her sagging pillow and thumping it a few times against the bronze bedstead.

He kissed her once, neatly and on the lips, and then drew the covers back over himself. "Only as long as you neglect to mention that your poor and long-suffering husband has been working night shifts lately."

She smiled as she padded over to the large, wooden dressing table that stretched its way across the far wall. "Poor dear." She considered her reflection in the mirror, which was framed by long, black hair and still rich in the slightly exotic beauty of which she'd always been well aware. "Make sure there's a bunch of flowers waiting for me on the table when I get back this evening. Something expensive. Then we'll see how much you really think you need your sleep."

He closed his eyes. "It's a date."

\* \* \* \* \*

A large, arched window stared down across the central square of the University. It was a good view, the Chancellor had decided – appropriate for the far wall of his generously furnished office. He could stand beside it all day, watching the students come and go, watching their lives make tiny imprints into the scene.

A long line of narrow steps sloped downwards from the surrounding walkways, leading onto a large stretch of stone that was surrounded on both levels by shops and other amenities. Red railings bordered the lengthy drop from the higher levels.

But these were only the foundations, the building blocks of his theatre. The scene itself was different every day, every time he looked. The previous weeks had been drenched in snowfall, leaving the University draped in a whiteness that glistened with a cold, unnatural sparkle as its residents hugged themselves against the cold. The grey, frosty light granted the ice-field the coherence of a smudged mosaic. No one lingered; no one sat alone on the steps sipping cold beer; the only passers-by moved swiftly, low.

If it were summer, the square would be packed. There would be protests, banners, and noise. The Chancellor wasn't sure which way he preferred it. But he could drink from the view forever - the sights, the sounds, spiralling up and up on the breeze. Right now, there were shapes in the snow. Mounds of powdery fluff, built up into facsimiles of men and women, each one ever so slightly *out*. He liked watching the snowmen melt. It said something important about the human condition, he thought, that man could not even build a replica of himself without it being condemned to waste away.

A sharp knock at the door brought him back to the four walls around him. It was odd for anyone to visit this early, before the seminars and the lectures had even begun. A quick glance at the black, hardback book spread open across his desk confirmed that there was no forgotten appointment. He took a deep breath. His room smelt sweetly of new things. The scented polish sprayed across the furniture. The fresh leather of the chairs. It soon settled him.

He ran a thin finger down his straight, black tie and said, "Come in." His voice rippled with the smooth, suffocating flavour of thick honey, and was almost impossibly low.

The wooden door opposite swung slowly open; revealing a short, thin-haired man who hurried in with a clipboard clutched under one arm. "Mr. Saul."

"Yes?"

"There's something I think you should hear, sir."

Saul gestured for the secretary to take a seat. A long, wooden table occupied the centre of his office. It had been polished to perfection, reflecting the glare of the windows back across the neighbouring walls. The rows of paintings and the catalogued display of ornaments swelled behind a shine of false gold.

The secretary leant forward. "It's Mr Sharp. "

"Yes?"

"He was found unconscious in his room, first thing this morning. Heart attack during the night."

Saul peered at him thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing into daggers. "Well? Is he dead?"

"No. Not this time. It seems his body's... well, giving up. Unless Mr. Smith discovers something that could get his hopes up again."

"My dear Mr. Smith..." whispered Saul.

"He could be a troublemaker."

"Indeed." He ran a thin fingernail across the table's smooth surface.

"If he finds the truth about you - "

"He won't." Saul got to his feet, turning away from the table and standing straight. He loomed over the secretary, his pose as solid as a perfect lie. "He could not even imagine it."

He dismissed his underling with a swift wave of his suited arm.

"One last thing," he called. "Every last word he says to Mr. Sharp. Inform me."

The secretary nodded, then hurried from the room.

*Mr. Smith.* A promising lecturer, Saul thought. An incredibly promising academic, too. But dangerously close to exhuming secrets that were better left dead and buried. It

would be a pity to have to terminate his contract. He should cancel lunch with those reporters, he decided. Think about the future. *His* future. It was almost a pity, he considered, crossing over to the small basin that sat above the far corner. It would have been better if Nathan Sharp had died during the night. He ran the cold water, rubbed his hands vigorously. Saul was walking on ice far too thin to allow the weight of an old friendship to bring everything crashing down. He sighed. The tap twisted back into position. The pipes beneath the basin gurgled.

He returned to the window. The scene soon calmed him, wiped away the worry and the irritation. His focus drifted away from the square, beyond the tallest buildings and out towards the horizon. The distant tree line was barely thicker than a matchstick, dark and dusky against the sea of green that made up the stretch of countryside that surrounded the University. The weather obscured all but the brightest features – under its haze of grey, only the odd tree or plot of flowers was visible. And the city, a black mass of rock barely a couple of miles to the south, a hulk of brooding buildings all shadowed by the snowfall.

On a beautiful day, he would be able to see everything, from the neighbouring villages nestled amongst the hills to the golden glades of flowers that speckled the fields. After all, he was standing on quite literally the highest point for hundreds of miles.

It was hardly a normal University, he knew. But then again, he was hardly a normal Chancellor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dimly lit city began to fan out before her. The last lamplights that lay scattered across the night sky were popping out of existence, one by one. The darker shades of cloud were beginning to fade, chased back behind the horizon by the freckles of a new dawn.

A dawn that was quite obviously hungover. Pale and drear, as though any attempt at colour had been spat out the night before, the memories of darkness and shadow still seething in the thin streams of dew far below. Sunlight flickered half-heartedly across the visor of her car, but the sparkle of the year's slow summer had long since bled away.

Elsa pulled down the throttle and settled back in her chair. Her vehicle pulled steadily away from the ground and rose into the morning sky, until the city and its surroundings had shrunk to the size of a postcard. After a few minutes' cruising, the bleached bone fields began to give way to long lines of streets, all peppered with snow from the storms of the last few days.

Then, from out of the gloom, rose her first sight of the University. Large and imposing, a harsh grey outline against the pallor of the dawn, layer upon layer of stone hewn together in a discord of architecture and design. A muddle of walkways and railings, all entangled around a series of structures and buildings tall enough to skewer any clouds that dared venture within its skeletal hand span. The deranged paintings of a particularly disturbed child, Elsa thought, ripped from its imagination and carved into the skies above her town. Somehow self-assured in its own improbability, it never failed to impress or impose.

Yet improbable it was, if not impossible. No amount of government grants had convinced the architects that such a project was even remotely feasible. But she remembered watching the first fleets of shuttles scrambling to assemble the support arrays, glued into position by anti-gravitational boosters that were said to be strong enough to shift a small asteroid. They buzzed like tiny flies, flitting back and forth high above the earth, manoeuvring the structure into position as though it were nothing more than a grid of pens and pencils. All top secret, modelled after the very finest designs.

For the first few years, it had barely been noticeable. Then, as the structure began to blossom outwards across the sky, the shadows beneath its base had begun to stretch like elastic. As the seasons turned, as the remnants of sunshine dissolved into thick, wet rain, as the rain hardened into gusts of snow, the University began inch by inch to impress itself upon the horizon. All year long, the weather had hammered down across this freak of engineering. Yet balanced in the sky as precariously as it was, nothing on earth could begin to move it once it had taken root. It was there to stay.

It had grown as she had grown. One of her first memories – standing beside her dad, back when he was still around, waving with her free hand at the tiny aircraft as they milled about during the ceremony before the first days of construction, watching through widened eyes as they played chase across an open sky. Listening to the arguments in the papers, that such a project had been made a necessity by the rapid overcrowding on the ground level, would place British technology back on its pedestal for the rest of the world to gaze at with awe, was nothing other than a miracle of science. That it was nothing other than a waste of money, intimidating and degrading to the residents of the slums that lay permanently in its shadow, an eyesore that threatened to devastate the surrounding areas. Already she'd decided to devote her life to unlocking the few secrets science had left to offer, and everything about this project fascinated her. Walking through the city one day, she'd spotted the flowering of an explosion over the terraced rooftops. The first attempt of many to halt the progress of the University before it was too late.

But it already had been. Over the following decades, as Elsa learnt to walk and talk, as Elsa stormed through each year of her schooling, as Elsa experienced the ecstasy and the pain of first love, the seed in the sky had sprouted into a granite fortress. In the summer of her graduation from another, altogether more grounded institution on the outskirts of a neighbouring town, the University had opened its gates. The first intake of students rode upwards into the perfect blue.

Now, barely a decade later, this day as much as any other, it was Elsa's turn. As she drifted onwards, other vehicles were beginning to join her flight path, rising steadily from the web of roadways beneath. The wavering winds were enough to bring her speed down to a crawl as she readied for the final approach. Sweeping to the left, seeking cohesion in a majestic arc, the vehicles gathered in a stream of traffic that looped around the long stretches of concrete and began to descend on the University.

She shifted down a gear and prepared to land.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It has been assumed since as far back as the twentieth century that the supremacy of technology and the decline of religion would go hand in hand. That as more and more answers are found, the need for the spiritual would, well, would *disappear*.”

The lecturer stared up at his audience from behind a pair of thin-framed glasses. He took a moment's break from his aimless pacing across the front of the lecture theatre and knotted his hands together behind his back.

“Now, I would like to put it to you as my final point for this afternoon that, if anything, the *reverse* is true. Religious activity over the last few centuries has been on the increase. Mikhail Travis has theorised that this is due to one main reason: that as our world is becoming ever more concrete, ever more definable, there is growing an increasing fascination with the abstract. With the things that we cannot see, cannot touch. *Cannot* define.”

His voice floated loud and clear across the large, sloping theatre. It was almost a pity, thought Cassandra Newton, that there weren't a few more people around to hear it. Still, lectures on theology that were pencilled in for Monday morning weren't known for their ability to attract an audience. Cassie herself had only come along due to the weather outside making the walk back to her flat something of an inconvenience. She was kind of glad that she had, though. This guy was making the sort of thing that, had it been available in pill form would have been hailed as the next best cure for Freshman insomnia, well, rather interesting. Plus, he was sort of cute. Beaming eyes and light, curly hair that fell just on the right side of straggly. If only he didn't look so manic. And, well, wasn't a lecturer. Must be at least ten years her senior?

"Of course, religion isn't only used for this purpose. People have also clung to it as a form of moral code. People who dwell in the realms of science, who *know* the spiritual side of things to be pretty much groundless, yet who gain a sense of purpose, of *being*, through the following of a strict set of guidelines. Modern social historians are all well aware of the strong rise in global crime around the turn of the twenty-first century, which continued for a fair few decades. It's believed that the fear of a developing savage, lawless society forced people towards the strongest, most secure set of boundaries that they could find. In this case, ancient religion."

Who was this guy? Cassie was pretty sure she hadn't seen him around the School of English Studies before. He had the sort of face she would recognise. She gently nudged the girl sitting next to her.

"You seen him before?"

"Hmm?" The girl brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes and peered down at the front. "Oh. No, never."

Odd girl, Cassie thought. Not that she considered herself a quick judge of character. It was only polite, after all, to allow a new flatmate to follow you around whilst she – or preferably *he* – adjusted to the rigours of a new campus. Even if this new girl *had* replaced that gorgeous Philosophy student.

When she turned her attention back towards the lecturer, he seemed to be staring directly at her. She found herself mouthing an apology. He offered her a polite smile before turning away.

"My personal interests as an academic, if you'll excuse my rather self-gratifying use of the first-person, fall more towards the realm of the abstract. As we continue to set the rules of our world down in stone, to push back the presence of the abstract, we are reminded only of the secrets that have *yet* to be unravelled. Of the few intangibilities that no amount of scientific thinking has yet to make tangible. And as the number of these phenomena decreases, the awe and mystery surrounding those that remain can only grow."

He turned back towards the small, wooden podium that contained his scattered sheets of notes.

"Thank you."

Then came the usual silence that accompanied the end of any lecture. The faintly awkward silence that suggested to Cassie that she should be applauding. The people on either side began to shuffle through their bags as she stretched to pull her thick leather coat back around her shoulders. It was bitterly cold outside, a stark contrast to the muggy warmth of the theatre, brought on by the long, low strip lights that cast their clinical glare down upon the rows of chairs. She climbed to her feet, smoothing out her jacket with one hand and wincing as she straightened her long legs.

Just as she was about to leave, however, she was surprised by a voice from the front:

"Like what?"

A middle-aged woman had moved down to the podium and intercepted the lecturer as he was gathering his notes. His forehead creased into a frown as wide as his eyebrows and he immediately straightened. The papers under his arm crashed to the floor.

“Hmmm?”

“Oh, erm...” The woman backed away, obviously embarrassed. Cassie tried to suppress a grin, only to find the corners of her lips curling upwards regardless. It was always good to see one of the mature students squirm.

To Cassie’s surprise, the lecturer took a step forward, crushing his papers underfoot, before taking the woman’s hand in his own. “Yes, my dear. How can I help?”

“Well, erm...” She smiled nervously, looking too much like a deer caught in the headlights of a monster truck. A handful of other students were also staring down at the two of them. “You were talking about the limits of our scientific learning – the things that still escape us.”

He nodded energetically.

“I was just wondering which of these interest you in particular.”

A broad smile widened across his face. “Time.”

Pockets of students, on the verge of the exit, began to file back in. A ripple of whispers spread through the slowly forming crowd.

“Time?”

“Yes,” the lecturer continued. “Time. What is it? Where does it go?”

The woman offered a nervous laugh.

“This moment *now*, I mean. It’s all around us, vivid, tangible. We live it, breathe it. Time is our lifeblood. A single moment is everything to us.” He cut a dramatic flourish with his arm. “And then it’s gone. But *where*, hmmm? What if we could find out? What if we could trace the passage of time and somehow get it back?”

“Erm, time travel?” She took a step backwards.

“Well,” he muttered dismissively, “if you want to confine your thinking to the realm of British science-fiction. All I’m proposing is that time is the only thing around us - the *only* thing - that we cannot even come close to manipulating. But what if someone was to find a way of making it theirs?”

Mercifully, Cassie found her mind begin to wonder. She just had time to notice a small smile appear on her new flatmate’s face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa hurried down the main hallway of the Arts building. The pile of books stashed against her chest was wobbling uncertainly as she negotiated the bustling corridors. The creases in her smart, black jacket would have to wait until she’d reached the respite of her office

She stopped suddenly. That was the Chancellor, striding speedily towards her, the crowd somehow parting around him with a hive-like precision. As their eyes met, a small smile crept onto his thin lips. *Damn*. Trust her luck to have a creepy boss.

She wasn’t late was she? She reached down to pull the sleeve of her jacket away from her watch. No, still five minutes before her one o’clock. That couldn’t be it. It wasn’t like she’d done anything wrong, her rather excessive use of the staff coffee machine notwithstanding.

“Mrs. Roberts.”

She smiled back as she shook his hand. The books plunged to the floor.

“Oh god, sorry.”

Chancellor Saul stepped back, his smile replaced by a firm grimace. “No, that’s okay.”

“What do you want? I mean, *god*, what can I do for you? Sir.”

He turned away from her, his hands knotting together behind his back. “I need you to do me a small favour.”

“Sir?”

He took a small step forward. “I’ve read your articles, Mrs. Roberts. String theory. Chaos theory. The application of time travel. Whatever next?”

She moved to stand beside him, keeping level with his slow pace as he began a march down the corridor. “Yes, I know, that one was kind of - ”

“Oh no, Mrs. Roberts. That one was very good. They were *all* very good.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“My pleasure.” In an instant, he was facing her again, his hand brushing against her arm. “You see, what I need you to do for me is *this*. Our esteemed colleague Doctor Smith is working on a problem. A problem that is proving to be of extreme difficulty. You strike me as a particularly intelligent young woman, Mrs. Roberts. As of tomorrow, I’m transferring you to a little side-project of mine. Any questions?” He patted her on the shoulder. “Good.”

Her eyes narrowed instinctively as he melted back into the crowd.

She spun on her heel and looked back towards her pile of books.

“Doctor Smith?” she said hesitantly. *God*.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What a nut.”

Cassie flashed a grin at her friend as she forced herself out into the thick cold.

“Oh?” Her new flatmate turned back to her. She looked like death in the pale air, Cassie thought. Even in the yellow light of their kitchen, her skin had shone an icy white. But she could forgive her new friend for neglecting to tan – her short, strawberry blonde hair was almost to die for. If obviously fake.

“Yeah, you know, the lecturer – he was odd. Where are you from anyway?”

“Oh.” Her flatmate turned away and pulled her coat tightly around her delicate shoulders. Maybe she was American. All around her, thin slivers of snow were dribbling down from an anaemic sky. “Not particularly.” She frowned. “I’ve always found him rather... dreamy.”

“Right.” What was it about this girl? Cassie was taking her to the bar later to meet her friends, in an attempt to aid her osmosis from Cassie’s particular social circle into a few new and separate ones. But there was something annoying appealing about the new arrival, something Cassie found interesting. Like now. She was standing still, her hair flapping gently in the breeze, gazing at the slowly sinking snowstorm as though it were a miracle.

This was, Cassie thought, one of the sweetest things she’d ever seen. The girl could almost be cool. If only she hadn’t been named after a bloody colour.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still mid-afternoon? Good, thought Carl Roberts, hurrying down the main landing of his house. That meant there was plenty of time before his wife returned home from work. He slowed his pace, his footsteps thudding softly against the thin, subtly-patterned carpet. The curtains along the walls rippled in his wake.

A sudden crash of glass called from somewhere downstairs.

He froze. Then, as his mind grappled for a voice, there was a cursing from the kitchen, loud and brusque. He took a step forward.

He opened his mouth to shout out. *No*, that would only alert the intruder. If he could just get to the phone and ring the police. But not enough time.

He could reach the utility cupboard; get hold of the gun that he'd put there for home protection. His fingers clenched. Each breath was silent. The second hand of his watch thumped against his shirtsleeve.

As he reached the bottom step and began to inch his way around the first corner of the hallway, a hulking mass of shadow loomed into view.

"Shit."

He spun away from the wall, threw himself towards the open space of the kitchen.

A single shot rang out.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was eight o'clock. The Union bar was beginning to slowly fill, with the gathering crowds of students raising their voices over the cheery pop music that bounced about in the background. Cassie agreed that it was a nice, friendly place, neither too large nor too small. She didn't think it was a good idea to drink too much there, though – the alcohol only made her aware of the silent thump of the engines far beneath her. She didn't want to be reminded just how high up she was, not when walking in a straight line was a problem.

Cassie sat surrounded by her friends, who were currently occupying one corner of the Union bar, spread out across the long, low sofas that lined each wall. She was talking to Grae, slowly and patiently. "Okay, how about this one. Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Grae stared back at her. "To get to the other side?"

"Yes! Well done!" Cassie patted Grae graciously on the shoulder. Grae sat back against the sofa, her lips pursed tight with thought.

"At least they have the classics where you come from," Marcy said with a smile. "Anyway." She turned away from her friends and picked up her drink. "About this guy."

Fiona laughed. "Not that we haven't got anything more interesting to talk about than one of our lecturers."

"Well," Marcy said, "not really." She gestured around at the rapidly-filling bar, flocking with throngs of students doing absolutely nothing in particular. The new lecturer won by default.

Fiona slumped back. "Okay. I think I'm drunk."

"Wait," said Grae. "There are on-campus chickens?"

"He was so... strange," whispered Cassie, her eyes narrowing in recollection. "Kind of gorgeous, in an annoying sort of way. But strange. He seemed to start talking about time-travel or some -"

"Yeah," Grae cut in quickly. "He was obviously on drugs or cannabis or something. Stupid, idiot man."

Marcy grinned. "Don't call the gorgeous lecturer stupid. Cassie fancies him!"

"I do not!"

"You do!" Marcy slammed down her empty glass triumphantly. "If you don't, then prove it!"

Cassie balked. "How on earth am I meant to prove something like that?"

She picked up her drink, downed the remaining liquid in one heavy gulp, and then returned it to its place on the table. "No idea."

“Okay!” Cassie shut her eyes. “Fine, I did some checking up on the guy this afternoon.”

“You did?”

“Yes, Grae. I found his staff page on the Uni intranet.”

“He has a *website*?”

“Yes, Grae. It didn’t say much, but I was right. He *did* move in here just recently.”

Marcy slumped an arm over Cassie’s shoulder. “Told you you fancied him.”

“He just said something that got me thinking. Anyway, I looked up some more pages, and there’s some more stuff about him. He isn’t directly employed as a normal member of staff, so of course no one sees him around.” She waved her hands dramatically. “He’s employed by the Chancellor, personally. Seems to working on some sort of side-project.”

“You know what?” whispered Marcy, leaning closer to Cassie and placing a hand on her lap. “I dare you to find out what it is he’s doing.”

“Your new friend can go with you,” said Fiona. “She seems inconspicuous.”

“Come on,” said Cassie, leaping to her feet and taking Grae by the hand. “Time to leave.”

\* \* \* \* \*

All Cassie could see above her were faint twists of cloud, thin ribbons of vapour that poked through the thick night sky and gleamed a pale grey against the black. A dense mist trailed across her vision as she hurried across the central square and over towards the steps that led up to the main walkway. The campus could almost have been designed to look sinister in the dark, she thought, glancing up at the shadowed buildings that framed the square and loomed over her. A single arched window stared down like a giant eye.

“So,” she said, looking back at Grae, “you want to go straight back now?”

Grae nodded. It was too cold to think of going anywhere else – besides, she wasn’t sure she really *got* the mindset of the people round here. Studying at the Academy had never involved drinking quite so many intoxicating liquids. University was turning out to be quite a confusing place, all things considered. She drew her long scarf tightly around her neck, watching as trickles of breath escaped from her lips and sketched icy patterns in the air around her, then hurried over to the walkway.

Their flat was about five minutes from the main campus, situated alongside a long stretch of glass that snaked its way across the western fringe of the University. As they moved away from the soft sounds of music and chatter that spilled from the bar, Cassie noticed their footsteps tapping softly against the stone, mingled faintly with the gentle whir of power that emanated from the white lights strung along the low walls.

“Doesn’t it feel odd?” she said suddenly.

“What?” Right now, Grae thought, her friend could have been referring to any number of things.

“Being so high up.” Peering through the night, she could barely see a thing, but there was an incredible sense of space, as though the night was near-infinite. “Almost like we’re on top of a mountain or something.” During the day, the journey back across the walkway always left her disorientated, as the view around her suddenly dropped to reveal an endless expanse of fields and buildings that made the horizon seem so far away that it might have been part of another world entirely.

“Oh.” Grae thought for a moment, and then returned the nod.

Cassie shrugged. Her new flatmate had never been much good at small talk. She shivered from the cold and continued walking. “You know,” she said slowly, reaching for conversation, “this place looks kind of scary in the dark.”

“I guess it does.” Grae looked back over her shoulder. “But there don’t seem to be any monsters following us, so I’m pretty sure we’re safe.”

Cassie stopped for a moment. A frown appeared as she tried to work out whether or not her friend was being serious. She’d done pretty well at the bar, but here she was acting all odd again.

A high-pitched cry shook through the fog.

“What was that?” Cassie spun round, taking Grae by the arm.

“I don’t know. The wind, perhaps.”

“Erm, I don’t think so.”

Another cry, sudden and loud and very near, splintering in the darkness and echoing back a hundred times.

“Come on!”

They quickened their paces, each breath fast and ragged as they hurried away, running in any direction that took them away from the desperate howl. Looking to the left, Grae noticed the fog rippling with the faint twinkle of moonlight on water, as streams of pearly white gusted through the mist and slid across the lake that bordered the far side of the campus. Thick and shining against the dark mass of the lake, it looked too much like the heavy, irrefutable stain of blood. Grae could feel the water calling her, dragging her away from the here and the now with a faint, spidery touch, and it was all she could do to pull herself away and break back into a run.

The second her right foot slammed against the concrete, another high-pitched scream shattered through the fog. Spinning around, she just had time to see the shadows gush towards her, spiralling in thick reeds as they broke free from the blackness with the tortured wail of a creature caught between life and death. The darkness was so close she could feel its breath, a cold trickle down the bare flesh of her face. *There* - two points of black that were denser even than the gloom around them, focussing on her, commanding the shadow to commence its attack as it screeched and roared and howled with the aching nothingness of the night.

All of a sudden, Cassie fell, her foot catching on the stone as she attempted a lunge for safety. Wheeling around, her arms spiralling into the air, she barely had time to scream before the thing was upon her. Her eyes wide with the primeval fear of the unknown, she lashed out at it, horrified to see her hand extending straight through the lumbering monstrosity and into the air beyond.

Leaping forward, Grae took her by the arm and dragged her away. Cassie kicked her feet against the ground, her limbs fuelled by panic, her mind racing as she leapt upright and screamed and hurled herself towards Grae. Grae yelled at her to run, but her gaze remained locked on the creature. An extreme sense of hunger seeped from it, pulled at her, wrenched at her hearts, snatching at the core of her being as though attempting to wrench it away and claim it for its own. It was like nothing she’d ever seen, nothing she’d ever felt. Finally, as Cassie pleaded at her to move, the panic fell into a deep calm, and she tore her eyes from it and broke into a sprint, beads of sweat matting down her hair even through the intense cold.

They ran and ran and ran, deeper into the night, towards freedom

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a smear of red against the kitchen table, bright and bold. Elsa could see it from the doorway as she took off her shoes and laid down her bag. The sight of it brought a slow grin to her lips.

Flowers on the table, waiting for her. She wondered what kind they would be. Carl always went for roses. He was so predictable, but that was probably why she found him so sweet. Roses were nice, anyway – they could always be relied on to round out a perfect day. A bouquet of roses opened up all sorts of possibilities.

The splash of red looked somehow thick and shiny.

Her grin was ripped from her face and her scream woke up the neighbours.

## Part 2

The old man sat alone in his leather chair, watching the wreathes of smoke rise and ripple around him. Fine and wispy, thinly stretched coils over his frail body. Dust had settled over the books that littered his table, reducing the treasure of an age to a papery carcass. Slow music, soft and steady and classical, tickled at the background.

There was a knock at the door.

“Please,” he whispered, his hands clenching into fists around the soft, smooth arms of the chair. “Leave me alone.”

The door creaked stiffly on its hinges. The Doctor stepped silently into the room, wincing as the half-light ate away at his eyes. “I heard about the heart attack,” he said. “Nathan. You have to hold on.”

The old man waved a hand dismissively.

The Doctor moved closer. “You contacted me.” His voice remained low and level as he continued, his speech punctuated by the soft sway of the music. “You brought me here to find your son, and I will. You just have to keep trusting me.”

“Why do you even help me?”

“Because I know what it’s like to lose someone that close.” The Doctor knelt down beside him. “And Saul is providing me with all the resources I could need.”

“Don’t trust that man.”

“No need to worry. I *don’t*. Saul just wants me to get the machine working again.” He rubbed absently at the back of his neck. “But let’s not worry about him yet. We’ll deal with him once we’ve found your son.”

Nathan winced. “It’s my fault he’s even missing. Last night, I saw it happen again. I saw him vanish, right in front of me.”

“Hey. We all make mistakes, decisions we wish we could wipe away. We all wonder what it would be like to turn back the clock.”

“I should never have started the experiments - ”

“No, maybe you shouldn’t have.” The Doctor stood. “But time is as enticing as it is dangerous, Nathan. Not everyone is immune to its temptations.” The fireplace suddenly flared, spitting a burst of red and yellow flame into the room. “I have to go to the laboratory. Something about meeting a new assistant there. The last time this happened was a good few lives ago, and it didn’t go too well.”

“Of course.” Nathan sank back into his chair. A withered hand clutched at the glow of the fire. “Please find my son.”

The Doctor nodded gently. “I will do. I promise I’ll bring him back.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered,” Nathan asked, leaning forward as the Doctor moved to leave, “what you could do if you chose to use your powers differently? Don’t tell me the idea doesn’t fascinate you. How could it not?”

He smiled. "Self discipline. And an apple a day."  
He found the music humming from his lips as he wandered out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie was rocking softly back and forth on her bed, her face a testimony of silent thought. Her gaze had drifted upwards to the blank white ceiling, which for the last few hours had felt uncomfortably close. The bedroom was hardly small, but ever since getting home last night the four walls had started to stifle her. Just sitting here alone, letting the thoughts zap back and forth, was enough to send a rising tide of claustrophobia swelling up inside.

Beneath her thin nightdress, the sheets were soft and cosy. They reminded her of lying awake at night in her garden at home, the sounds of insects and various predators marking a secret correspondence from somewhere in the darkness, her sleeping bag a warm cocoon around her. She would watch the stars, counting out each constellation, and wonder secretly if anything had been staring back at her. It seemed her question might finally have been answered.

She glanced around her room. It was hard to imagine that everything was just the way she'd left it the day before, the same veneer of neatness that coated each surface and shadowed the dust. Nothing had changed, yet nothing was the same anymore. The curtains were still drawn, but a faint lick of light spilled in from outside. Cassie had sat awake all night and now her eyes bore the thick, black mask of sleeplessness. She'd stood silently at the basin and splashed cold water over her face until she'd been able to feel nothing other than the silvery wetness sliding down her skin and over her clothes, and now her t-shirt was stained grey and her chest was shivering under the chill. She dabbed at it with the end of her sheets and tried to cleanse her mind.

A sudden knock at the door brought her back to the present.

"Yeah?" She ruffled around with her bedclothes in a half-hearted attempt to smooth out the creases.

It was Grae, still dressed in her nightclothes with her wet, straggly hair hanging loose around her shoulders. She stepped slowly into the room and sat down on the bed beside Cassie. "Are you okay?" she asked, and she placed a hand gently against her friend's shoulder.

Cassie nodded, but it was clear that her composure was rapidly crumbling.

Grae sighed, and took a brief look around the room. She'd spent quite a few hours hanging around in here, since arriving a few weeks ago. Just like every room in the flat, the bed had been placed against the right-hand wall, and there was a long table sitting below a series of shelves at the far end. A small alcove by the door extended into a corridor, which led to a cupboard and a modestly sized shower-room. The walls and the ceiling were a cold, clinical white, and a stark contrast to the homely green swirls of the soft carpet.

It was the individual details, though, that made each of the rooms unique, a snapshot of the owner's character. There was a television on top of the desk, and various books on theology and philosophy sitting on the shelves, which Grae knew didn't stand a chance of being opened. A brightly patterned rug lay across the floor, and the table opposite the bed was littered with an assortment of objects, including discarded crisp packets, empty bottles, the odd item that might occasionally be looked at, and something that Cassie called a bong, which Grae could never quite work out a use for.

"Last night," Cassie said at last. "What happened?"

Grae frowned. What could she say? What would the Doctor say? She wasn't sure if Cassie would ever be ready to know what really happened. She wasn't sure if she knew

herself. But they could both have died. It wasn't fair to hold back the truth, not when their lives were at stake. After last night, Cassie at least deserved her respect. If the Doctor ever held anything back from her, she reflected, it'd hurt like nothing else. Trust was the most powerful gift a person could give. And taking that gift away... Well, it was never nice.

So the truth, then.

She moved her hand away, and began to speak.

"Oh," Cassie said, once Grae had finished her story.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." She fidgeted a little, struggling to get comfortable, and wiped the back of her hand across her bleary eyes. "A big oh. Can't we, erm, contact this lecturer friend of yours?"

Grae thought for a moment. "We could. The Doctor briefed me to keep my distance as much as possible, so his cover stays safe. I'm meant to be looking round for anything out of the ordinary while he works out how to get this Mr. Sharp's machine working again."

"And what happened last night... You wouldn't say that was at all, well, out of the ordinary?"

Grae smiled. "I guess it could be considered a little strange. You're taking this all rather well, by the way."

Cassie shrugged. "Haven't really got any other options, really. Except for crying like a girl, of course. And that got old sometime around four A.M." She pointed to the pile of wet tissues that lay scattered across the floor.

"That's the spirit."

"Thanks. Plus, you know, in the lecture yesterday, he *did* seem a bit of a freak."

"So," said Grae, unfolding her legs and clambering to her feet. "You got anything this morning?"

"Yeah. Well, Morals and Ethics, in an hour or two. But I was planning on skipping that *before* I nearly got eaten."

"Good, I'm free too. The Doctor should be available sometime around lunch. So we'll meet him then and explain what happened."

"Right. See you back here."

Cassie watched as Grae left the room. A faint frown appeared. The lecturer yesterday was one of her kind? So, time travel was possible, aliens existed, and somewhere in a galaxy far, far away there was a planet that specialised in breeding these weirdoes. *Wow*, she thought. University really did broaden the mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa Roberts checked nervously back over her shoulder. As she caught herself, a wry smile crept onto her lips. It was stupid to jump at the unknown. Even if the unknown happened to be so incredibly dark and dank. The shapes were just shapes, however screwed up they looked. They couldn't hurt her. A flutter of dust sent a cough through her throat. She shook her head, allowed herself a moment to collect herself, and then took another step forward. Her heels clattered languidly against the metal floor.

She absently patted her jacket pocket, checking for the shape of a key. Good. At least she wouldn't get stuck down here. The lowest floor of the arts building, reserved for this skeleton of a basement, wasn't where she planned on spending the rest of her life. It'd been such a relief, hearing that Carl was okay. Well, if you counted a bullet through the chest *okay*... He'd survive, anyway – be perfectly fine after a simple operation to remove the offending projectile. It could have all been so much worse. But there he was, safe and secure

in a hospital bed, whilst she had to endure the sort of scenario that resembled something from a particularly eccentric kids' cartoon. Trust him to get shot and *still* have it easy.

Beyond the stacks of crates, a twin set of metal doors was indented into the far wall. She approached it cautiously, reached out with a nervous hand, and placed her palm against the grey square set beside the doorframe. It beeped shrilly, and a second later the door slid open.

Very 'wacky lecturer going through mid-life crisis', she thought. She hadn't known what to expect from Doctor Smith. She'd talked to other people who'd seen him, who'd denounced him as a complete nutcase. Even so, a secret base in the bowels of the Arts building – that was just stupid.

She stepped into the room beyond.

Actually, it was kind of *amazing*. A bright white light beat down from a tall, cavernous ceiling, which hung across an array of tables all littered with equipment that she wouldn't have dreamt the University could ever afford. The latest instruments, everything that she'd read about in her journals. As she moved slowly forward, her gaze swinging from left to right, a tiny gasp escaped her lips. The room was truly vast.

"Magnificent, isn't it."

She spun around. Approaching her from the left was a tall man who seemed to be teetering on the right side of middle-aged, his eyes clear and green and his nose almost aristocratic. He wore a dark jacket, patterned with swirls of stars, and smart, beige trousers. A neat beard surrounded his full lips and extended down around his chin, matching the hair that tumbled to his shoulders.

"Doctor Smith?"

"Just the Doctor, actually." He grinned and extended his arm. "I assume you've been given the privilege of working with me down here amongst Chancellor Saul's quite amazing laboratory."

"Well, yeah." She shook his arm heartily.

"Would you like a cup of tea? The kettle's already on, there should be enough for two."

"Thank you." She smiled. "Milk and sugar please."

"Of course. I'll be right back."

\* \* \* \* \*

"There are many reasons why I love being in charge," the Chancellor said tiredly, leaning back in his leather chair as his secretary stared at him with a nervous glint flicking back and forth behind his eyes. "The money. The prestige." He was staring down at the small black box that sat on the table, swathed in his shadow. He pursed his lips and placed his elbow against the arm of the chair. "The company car is nice."

"Sir."

"But what I like most of all is the respect I am afforded by my staff. We all seem to get on. There's almost a..."

"A bond?"

"No. No, an *understanding* between us. We seem to share a mutual goodwill." He reached forward with his free arm and pressed the switch on the small box.

"Saul just wants me to get the machine working again. But let's not worry about him yet. We'll deal with him once we've found your son."

"I'm very rarely libeled in this way."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor returned with two steaming mugs of tea and placed them both on the laboratory table nearest to where Elsa was standing, her gaze still adjusting to the sights around her. “This one’s yours,” he said, pointing to the mug on the left.

“Thanks.” She carefully picked it up and took a pensive sip. *Ouch*, still too hot. Placing it back down, she turned to the Doctor and regarded him thoughtfully. “So, why am I here?”

He pointed at a small, silver box that sat alone on one of the nearby tables. It was encased in a snaking mass of leads and wires that spilled out over the side and ran deep into the metal floor.

She raised an eyebrow. “That?”

“Well yes, specifically.”

She took a step towards it. Her gaze narrowed with thought, then moved away and hovered around the rest of the room. She noticed for the first time a series of silver cylinders hanging from the ceiling, a faint whine trickling from each one as it pulsed with a gentle light, sending half-formed patches of shadow pursuing each other across the walls. Vast metal struts ran in rows from floor to ceiling. Between them, indented into the walls, was a bewildering array of consoles, dials and switches, all inert and lifeless. Her vision trailing along the softly humming cables that ran from them, she stared down at the floor and then back up at the silver box. And then she looked at her feet. There was something about the ground too, the way it was insulated, the way it prodded at certain thoughts and ideas she’d had for most of her life but never had the confidence to voice.

“This room,” she said slowly, reaching out and touching the small box. The Doctor hurried towards her, wincing as she snatched back her hand from the gentle vibrations that leapt out at her.

“Now,” he said, “there’s something I should - ”

“It’s a time machine.”

“Oh *thank god*.” He brushed a hand through his hair, a broad smile turning his face almost angelic with relief as he stared at her. “Or *yes*. When it’s working, at any rate.”

“I mean,” she said, turning away, spinning slowly on the spot, taking everything in once again, expecting it to vanish the second she blinked, a tiny part of her refusing to believe the reality of what she was seeing, “it’s impossible, right? I’ve spent years reading about it, written a few articles myself actually, and everything here... it fits. But it’s impossible.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Apparently not.”

“But how... how is this *real*?”

“That’s the thing, you see.” He returned to his tea and took a heavy mouthful. “There’re a number of things about this place that shouldn’t be real. And I don’t just mean the highly impossible time machine part.”

“Then what?”

He spread his arms wide. “This University. The technology needed to keep a structure like this in the air... It doesn’t exist yet. Not in the twenty-first century.”

“Wow.” Her mouth hung open.

“It seems I need to bring you up to speed.”

“I want to know everything,” she said, wonder in her widened eyes. “Please don’t hold back.”

“Of course not.”

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\* \* \* \* \*

The University diner was rapidly filling with customers. The clock hanging over the counter displayed the time as nearly one o' clock, and queues of students were shuffling in long lines around each of the food displays, the bags slung over their shoulders brushing against their neighbours as they reached for the drink machines. A buzz of chatter continued to rise from them as they clamoured for what was on offer.

Cassie and Grae had arrived twenty minutes earlier, having both learnt the hard way that it was the only means of guaranteeing a table. The diner was a large, two-floored building, with neatly polished wooden furniture, strings of greenery decorating the walkways, and the sort of lighting that came dangerously close to being too bright. They were sitting on the top floor, staring out of one of the large glass windows as the snow continued to fall across the courtyard. Every so often, a flowery bead of white would brush against the glass and leave a thin, papery smear as it slid down to the frosted concrete beneath.

Cassie rubbed her hands against the warm cup of coffee on the table in front of her. "Is he always late?"

"Yes."

"Kind of ironic, right?"

Grae smiled. "Tell me about it."

The Doctor chose that moment to flop down onto the chair next to Grae. "Hello. It's good to see you again. Sorry about the wait, I couldn't get away" He gave her a brief hug, and then rested his arms on the table in a pose of solid thought. "Now, I think it's time you told me exactly what happened last night."

Grae told him.

"Shadow monsters?" His eyebrows rose with incredulity. "Now *there's* a new one. No wait..."

"It was horrible," said Grae. "I could feel it kind of...dragging me in. Like it wanted to suck the life out of me."

"Very strange. What about you?" he asked, turning to Cassie.

"Well no, nothing like that. But it did try to eat me."

"Intriguing."

"No it *wasn't!*"

"That's not what I meant!" He shook his head in exasperation, then turned back to Grae. "Now, it seems these creatures have some sort of time-sensitivity. People like Grae and I," he explained, "who tend to have more experience in this area than most - we probably smell a little like food." He leant closer to Grae. "You did tell her about the TARDIS?"

She nodded.

"Good. Their presence obviously means that there's something more to all this. Hmm."

"Maybe," said Grae, "when Mr. Sharp first activated the time machine - "

"Yes! Something *must* have gone terribly wrong for his son to vanish like that. Perhaps he damaged a part of time itself. That *would* make sense. When I first arrived, the machine was in a terrible state."

"And the creature we saw is here because of whatever went wrong."

The Doctor nodded. "It's certainly possible. What we know for sure is that for these wraiths to appear, something must be present inside the University that most definitely should *not*."

Cassie shrugged. "So what do we do about it?"

"Well," the Doctor replied, "I suppose I should continue trying to fix the machine. Then we can establish where it sent Nathan's son. After all, that's why I was called here. And my new assistant and I are making excellent progress." His eyes narrowed. "Though I can't help but think Chancellor Saul knows more than he's letting on... He certainly seems to have a vested interest in all this."

"You want us to investigate him?"

"No, Grae. We don't know the man's limits. If you and your young friend here could concentrate on trapping one of these creatures..." He frowned. "Then we may just be able to find out where the damage is centralised."

"I'm no younger than Grae," Cassie said pointedly, her lips thinning to a pout.

"Please don't interrupt. Anyway." The Doctor pushed back his chair and clambered to his feet. "You should find the equipment you need in the TARDIS."

"Right. Where did you leave it?"

"In the car-park. Took me nearly an hour to find a space."

"Right." Grae stood. "We'll contact you once we know more."

"Excellent." The Doctor turned to Cassie. "And you're sure this isn't all too much for you?"

"Of course not! I'm a University student, remember."

He smiled. "That's what worries me."

She turned her back to him, a deep scowl vivid against her indignant features, and watched from out of the corner of her eye as he marched smoothly away across the diner.

But a pair of security guards was standing beside the door, looking as conspicuous as possible dressed in the standard uniform of black jackets and trousers. As the Doctor moved towards them, they quickly stepped forward and approached him from either side.

"Sir. If you'd like to come with us."

"I'm sorry?" He stopped dead, confusion in his eyes. "If it's about that paperweight, I meant -"

"No sir. Chancellor Saul would like a word."

"Oh. Can't it wait?" He grinned. "You know how it is."

"Not really. *This* way please."

Before he could say another word, they took him by the arms and dragged him speedily out into the cold, his limbs flailing uselessly. A small crowd stood watching, a murmur of conversation beginning to build around them, and the doors slid shut behind the guards with a hiss of electricity.

Cassie allowed herself a quiet smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor was struggling to hide his annoyance as the two security guards bundled him into the Chancellor's office. Tall and broad-shouldered, they'd not said a single word since they'd frogmarched him from the diner. His mind had turned briefly to thoughts of escape, but he then decided instead that the best thing to do was to stick it out and wait. He was, after all, one of Saul's employees. And secretly he felt that a good, old-fashioned confrontation was *well* overdue.

Watching over his shoulder as the guards left the room and shut the door with a heavy thud, he dusted down his jacket and straightened his pose. Saul, standing silently by the window with his back to him and his fingers kneaded together, swung slowly around.

“Ah. There you are. You know, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you all day.” He thought for a moment. “Actually *no*, that’s a lie. I’m not really sure I like you very much, not after everything you’ve been saying. If there’s one thing my father taught me, you see, it’s not to talk about people behind their back. Some of us consider it rude.” He gradually advanced, each footstep quiet and deliberate. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so offended in all my life. Except for that one time a teacher recommended me for psychiatric evaluation. But I digress.”

“You don’t scare me,” the Doctor replied, his eyes a projection of passionless calm.

“I didn’t intend to. Well, a little fear would have been nice, but, ah *well*.” He shrugged apologetically.

“I know you didn’t bring me here for small talk,” said the Doctor, taking a step towards him.

“Right. I brought you here to issue a…” His fingers snatched at the empty air. “A *warning*.”

“What’s brought this on? Ah, you heard what I said to Nathan.”

“I did. And I don’t think you’ll be seeing him again. In fact, I don’t think you’ll be leaving the laboratory much at all anymore. Not if you want your young friend to come out of all this in one piece. And *yes* Doctor, before you ask, this *is* a threat.”

The Doctor took a step back, a tiny chink appearing in his resolve.

Saul allowed himself a quiet smile

The Doctor’s eyes slowly narrowed. “Who *are* you?”

“That’s for me to know, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll find out.”

“Oh, you’ll try. You won’t find a thing.”

“You obviously underestimate me.”

“Doctor,” he said, the word half-hidden under a heavy sigh, “I think not. Now will you *please* return to the laboratory and fix my time machine.”

“It doesn’t even belong to you!”

“*Doctor*. I have a whole lot of marking to do.”

“Fine, Saul.” He spun swiftly away, his expression lost in the quiet rage that coursed across his face. “But this isn’t over.”

“Of course it’s not,” Saul replied, turning back to the window as the door slammed shut. Strands of snow had settled against the glass, shaping themselves into thin, white bars. Kind of appropriate, considering how he was *stuck* here. But not for much longer. Soon, he thought hungrily, *soon* he would be free. And when he was… Why, every single person who’d ever crossed his path would scream his name until their lungs had shattered and their throats had bled dry and their voices had been ripped as coarse as charcoal.

Again and again and again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa sighed, perhaps for the hundredth time. She’d started to lose track of how many hours she’d spent stooped over the equipment. The Doctor had told her that he wouldn’t be gone for long, that she should spend the first morning familiarising herself with the general layout and mechanics of the room, but as morning had turned into afternoon she’d found herself wandering back over to the silver box that had been described as the hub of the time machine. *Wow*, the time machine. Her complacency in the face of such a topic was almost worrying.

Everything else seemed to be working perfectly. Well, it wasn't like she had a degree in temporal engineering or anything, but from the modest amount of knowledge she'd gleaned over the years she figured it was all more or less in order. Everything she would have thought a time machine needed, anyway. But the hub remained stubbornly unresponsive.

She thumped it with her fist.

"Oh well."

The Doctor charged into the laboratory. Practically fuming, he strode over to Elsa, his grim expression fighting a half-hearted battle to hide the rage that was scrawled all over it.

"That man!"

Elsa smiled sympathetically. "Saul? He's certainly odd, I know."

"He's more than odd. He's quite mad, and for all we know very, very dangerous."

"Dangerous?" He'd always been a little unsettling, sure, but it wasn't like he'd ever done anything to threaten her.

"Yes," he said, taking off his jacket and flinging it down over one of the stools, "*dangerous*. And worst of all, entirely unpredictable. He didn't do a very good job of hiding the fact that he wants this thing fixed almost as badly as Nathan Sharp."

"Maybe he's a devout philanthropist?"

The Doctor shot her a withering glare. "I doubt he cares about the poor man's son any more than he does the rest of us."

"Then perhaps he just wants a fully functioning time machine? I mean, I can kind of see the attraction."

"Hmmm. Either way, I want this thing working as soon as possible."

"Why's that?"

"Firstly, he could hurt my friend." He marched across to the silver machine and pulled up his shirtsleeves. "Secondly, I'd like to have something over him before I have to worry about what his plans are."

"One thing," Elsa said, "before we get all gung-ho about this."

"Yes?"

"There's a phone call I need to make."

"Fine." He leant over, peering at the box through narrowed eyes, then reached across the bench for a screwdriver and gave the wires that surged from the top of the box a gentle prod.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was coming. Cassie could see it over the horizon, a dark fringe of sky that was rolling silently towards her, blotting out each inch of light under its thick, spectral taint. The soft wind was starting to taste faintly of the darkness, a crisp reminder that in barely an hour's time the University itself would shrink back under a falling curtain of shadow. As sure and certain as the slow march of time, the night was on its way.

Well, she thought, tightening her grip on the weapon, *bring it on*.

They were moving cautiously across the walkway, their bodies drawn close to the wall as they crept onwards. Grae hurried forward, just a metre or two, then dropped down against the stone and waved at Cassie to follow. She sank to her knees and leaned close to her friend.

"What now?" she whispered.

Grae glanced calmly over her shoulder. "We wait."

"Hopefully not for that thing to kill us..."

“No.” Grae looked down at her own weapon. It was a short, thin tube, shaped like a spear with a sharpened tip at one end and a small switch at the other. “This time we’ll be ready for it.”

“You think this’ll work?”

“Uh huh.”

“You think? Really? I mean, it looks - ”

“You’re babbling.”

“Oh right.”

Cassie looked away. She realised then that she was shivering, and compared to the night before it was hardly cold. Warm currents of air were whistling around the walkway, a gentle swell from left to right that was calm and slow. She closed her eyes and turned to the sky, still a brooding grey hulk over the gradually darkening landscape, and tried to stop her hands from shaking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa stepped away from the pay phone.

Something somewhere had gone horribly wrong. The routine operation had failed. Carl was dead. The doctors said that they were sorry, and that they’d done all they could, and that she could come and see the body before it was cremated, if she wished.

This couldn’t be what had happened.

Her world tumbled down beside the handset of the phone. She fell onto her knees; her eyes burning with tears, and let the grief spill out of her until only anger was left to seethe inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saul stood alone by the window. He had the perfect vantage point of the central square, which was rapidly emptying as the day drew to a quiet close. That afternoon, the snow had started to subside, paving the way for weather with a far kinder bite. In the soft wind of the growing twilight, the trees were lurching skeletons, dug into the ground. The sun was a long slice of red, which glittered over the lower buildings, brilliant and beautiful against the pallid skyline. It was all the snowflakes could do to reach the ground with their tiny hearts still beating.

Of course, he thought, it had all come at a price. The square had been packed for most of the day. Groups of friends had sat on the steps together. And now the concrete below him was pockmarked with litter: the stubs of cigarettes, crisp-packets, discarded newspapers speaking of news that no one would want to read anymore, that would already be history. He sometimes wished that he had a sniper-rifle handy. It would certainly let them know how little right they had to desecrate his ground. Just as soon as he had his way with the world, they would be one of the first things to go.

In fact, the three reports of students being attacked during the night were somewhat pleasing. Although every so slightly worrisome. It was all too easy to put it down to giving the Union bar far too much money for its own good. Unless... No, it couldn’t possibly be his fault. His plans were as immaculate as anything he’d ever designed. They were perfection itself. And even if there *was* a flaw... Why, it would soon be the work of a moment to rewrite it.

There was a sudden croak of metal.

He turned on the spot. “You know what I like most about the British? Our impotent politeness. We always knock before entering.”

“Shut up.”

Elsa was standing in the doorway, her pose crumbling, her face a silenced echo.

“And we’re rarely rude to our superiors.” His forehead narrowed into a frown as he stepped away from the window. “Mrs. Roberts. Though how much longer you’ll be calling yourself that now is anyone’s guess.”

“What?”

“Your eyes, Mrs. Roberts. They look like the view outside my window.”

She folded her arms. “The machine you want fixed is a time machine, I know that. Doctor Smith is pretty close to finding out why you *really* need it, I know *that*. And the thing is, I don’t much care.”

“I think I can guess where this is leading.” A smile flickered over his lips. “You help me, and I’ll see to it you die surrounded by grandchildren.”

“Fine.”

He marched smoothly across to the door and pulled it gently shut.

### Part 3

The darkness was a living thing, breathing and whispering and shifting around them as they watched. It had a thick, tangible presence, and it trickled from corner to corner with the low growl of the night.

“There!” hissed Cassie, suddenly alert. “I saw something.”

“Where?”

“Over there.” She pointed down the length of the walkway and lifted the barrel of her weapon.

Grae nodded. The shadows were moving, darting back and forth from each patch of light and lapping softly at the stone like the swing of an obsidian tide. She shifted her balance onto one foot and crept slowly forward.

“What if someone sees us?”

Grae sighed. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, what if the creature sees *them*.” She peered into the distance, and then beckoned Cassie forward with a flick of her wrist.

Cassie took a quick glance over her shoulder, and then hurried after her friend.

And the night exploded in a blinding roar.

“Jesus!”

Cassie threw herself to one side, just in time to avoid the blackness erupting in her wake and lashing out at her with flames of pure shadow. She could feel it against her face, utter nothingness that clawed and stretched to strip away her skin, and she dived back as it gathered itself together into a single ball of gloom and launched itself at her.

Grae lunged forward with the barrel of her gun and thrust it deep into the core of the dark. It flailed out at her, pure fury ringing and wailing, and flung her back with a cry that echoed and echoed through the night. But Cassie was back on her feet, taking Grae’s weapon for herself and forcing it further in, driving it down with all the strength she could muster and praying to God that it would somehow be enough. She skidded on the wet stone, but gritted her teeth and dug in her heels and yelled at herself to stay steady in the face of the storm. Shaking with wrath, it fought to fling her off, but she shrieked her defiance and stamped her weapon down hard into the heart of the darkness.

And the shadow was shrinking back, blood on its breath, with an animal rage as vivid as the night sky rupturing from it as the weapon finally worked and the flesh split in

two. The darkness collapsed in on itself, thinned to a sliver of the purest black that Cassie had ever seen, and finally it vanished.

The screaming stopped, and the night fell calm and silent.

“There we are,” said Cassie, holding her free hand out to Grae as she clambered to her feet. “One shadow monster to go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa Roberts stared blankly ahead into the mirror. She took a deep breath, and then took another, just to check that a small part of her was still working properly. She lifted a shaking hand to her face and slowly brushed it against her skin. It felt cold, clammy. She was probably still in shock. At least it was something.

She rubbed at the oily rings around her eyes. She needed to stay calm. She needed composure. This wasn't going to work if she cried like a baby, if she let her emotions get the better of her. They were merely impulses that needed to be controlled, to be kept in check. Everything was going to be fine; Saul would see to it. A bowlful of tears wasn't what Carl would want from her. She would shape her emotions; work them into something useful. She reached deep inside and sought out the quiet serenity that she would need to complete her task. Forging from it the sharpest knife she could find, she plunged it deep into the rage that festered within her and ripped it through the gut.

Her hands were still shaking. Damn. A silent tear pricked at her eyes.

*Fine*, she thought.

She twisted the handle of the tap over the basin and let the water run down over her hands and over her wrists until they were so cold it burnt.

“My husband,” she said, watching each twitch of her lips in the mirror, “is dead.” She repeated it once or twice, relishing the sour taste of each word.

“He died, and I'll never speak to him again, and I'll never touch him, and I'll never know what it's like to be held by someone who loves me.”

She could feel the anger welling up in the closet of her chest.

*Better*.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor rubbed absently at the bridge of his nose and stared down at the hub of the time machine. All around him, the instruments were throbbing gently, the sound of power drifting in a low hum across the laboratory. A soft light was undulating around the receptors that hung from the ceiling, signs of a steady but slow rate of progress. As he stabbed and prodded at the hub unit, however, it remained stubbornly inert.

“*Damn* it. You can count on me for practically anything,” he mused. “When it comes to saving the Universe, I'm as reliable as the next man. But DIY? Don't get me started.”

He breathed in deeply, allowing the slow inrush of air to settle his rising irritation.

Suddenly, Elsa was standing silently behind him.

“Oh hello, I didn't hear you come in. Did you make that phone call?”

“I did.”

“And how is everything?”

“Everything's fine.”

“Good.” The Doctor returned his attention to the silver unit. “I wish I could say the same for this old thing.”

“What's wrong with it?”

"I'm still not sure exactly."

"Can I have a look?"

"Of course." He stepped back, running a hand across his damp forehead as Elsa took his place. "I get the feeling we don't quite have the full picture. I mean, it looks fine. It should be working – but it doesn't take a genius to see it's still broken." His face knotted in concentration. "There's an idea in here somewhere you know, if it would just come forward..."

The door slid open with a whoosh of air, and in walked Cassie and Grae, a skip in their step and grins of triumph wide across their faces.

Cassie handed the Doctor her weapon. "Here you go." She looked at Elsa. "Let us never speak badly of the student ever again."

The Doctor snatched the device from her eagerly.

"Hey!" Her features creased in indignation. "How about a thank you?"

He smiled politely. "Thank you. Now let's take a look at whatever it is you've caught."

The Doctor pressed the switch at the base of the instrument. A shrill beep cut into the air, and was followed by a series of low whines. "Hmmm." He narrowed his eyes, watching through the transparent shielding as a black mass surged and bubbled inside.

Cassie approached him. "What is it?" She looked down at the seething, wriggling amoeba of darkness and felt a shiver rise up her spine. It seemed to be accumulating the shadows cast by the strip-lights, as though choking the brightness around it in preparation for a final, desperate assault.

The Doctor turned to Grae. "Ever seen one of these things before?"

She shrugged. "Well, no."

"Neither have I. But I've heard an awful lot about them." His voice was hushed. "And I'm afraid this changes pretty much everything."

Elsa looked up at him. "So what is it then?" Grae frowned. The woman had stood there wordlessly all this time, her head hung ever so slightly low and her hands crossed over her lap. She looked like she'd usually appear quite pretty, but her features had hardened almost to rock, and there was something about her pose, something that suggested it was taking every bit of resolve she had to stop it from crumbling to pieces. Grae couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone look so fragile.

Oh well, she thought, this was probably all a bit of a shock to her system.

"That's just the thing," the Doctor replied. "It isn't really an *it* at all. Not in the literal sense, anyway."

"Then what?" demanded Cassie, her voice rising in frustration.

He spun around to face her. "It's not a creature, or an alien, or whatever term you might wish to use. Strictly speaking, it isn't even alive."

"Oh." Grae reached forward and took the device from his hands, her gaze widening in thought. "It's energy, isn't it? Something from the vortex."

"Yes. Meddling with time can damage certain... fabrics of reality that were never even meant to be discovered. I guess you could call this a manifestation of that damage. I was right about one thing: there's something here that *shouldn't* be. This *thing* is being driven towards the anomaly – its only instinct is to wipe it out, to resolve whatever it sees as the problem. It would be highly sensitive to anything that's been travelling through time, and probably highly confused." His forehead knotted in thought. "Of course, Nathan's time travel experiments could never cause this much damage, not on their own." He stamped his foot against the metal flooring. "That's not fair; no wonder I couldn't fix the thing! I think it's time I had another word with Mr. Sharp."

“There’s something I need to do too,” said Elsa suddenly, glancing up to meet the Doctor’s gaze. “An errand I need to run.”

He smiled. “Of course. If we meet back here in, say, an hour?” He checked his watch and nodded. “Yes, that should give us plenty of time to sort out our affairs.”

He retrieved his jacket from its place on the bench and marched smoothly towards the door, a blur of activity as he vanished into the corridor. Grae turned to Cassie and nodded towards the exit, and the two of them slowly followed suit, leaving Elsa to stand alone amongst the machinery.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saul was sitting alone at his table, the soft light from the lamps carving his face into a pale relief as he sifted through the sheets that were spread out in front of him. There were curtains drawn neatly across the window now, an ashen white against the blackness that brushed at the glass. He could stand beside it, stare out, let the view soothe his rising irritation, but it would be too dark to see anything except the bulk of the shadow and the odd lost bead of snow.

A total silence hung over the room. That was how he liked it, especially at nighttime. Noise was disturbing, but the peace soon relaxed him, let each thought take its time and trickle in one by one. The rush and clutter of the day often made him hungry for the dark to settle in.

The calm was broken by a sudden knock.

“Come in.” He rose from his slumped position and dropped his perfectly sharpened pencil onto the table. The door creaked on its hinges, which he would have to do something about in the morning, and Elsa walked in, crumbs of hesitation vivid in her slow movements and the tired, almost haunted look that was caged behind her eyes.

He stood to meet her, but she stopped a few inches from his desk.

“I can’t help but think I’m betraying him.”

Saul smiled. “Of course you can’t. And why should you? This *is* a betrayal. You should look the word up sometime if you’re still unsure.” He reached for her hand, making sure that her gaze was level with his own and that it stayed there. “But the only thing you have to concern yourself with right now is that I am a man of my word. Unlike the Doctor, I will do what is necessary.”

She flinched as he moved behind her. “I hope so.”

“Oh, you know so. Elsa you wouldn’t be here.” His voice was barely a whisper. “Now, what news do you have for me?”

“He knows something about the machine. That it isn’t meant for time travel. That it works some other way.”

“Really? He *has* been making good use of his time.”

“You might have told me.”

“Yes I might. But I think you’re being paid well enough to keep your nose out of my business. Thirty pieces of silver, Mrs. Roberts? Plenty for some.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Please. I don’t understand any of this. I just want -”

“Your husband back, *yes*. But you remember our deal, Mrs. Roberts?”

“Yes.”

“Then you will go back to the Doctor, and you will wait, and you will honour our agreement.”

When she opened her eyes, he was back in front of her. She pulled her gaze away and looked down to the floor, and found a shiver ripple through her. Every word of his,

every damn word, had echoed back barbed with the merest hint of a threat slipped between each low syllable. How did he do that? How could he make her feel so uneasy?

She stepped back, and looked slowly up at him, and nodded.

He smiled. "When this is over, you will have your reward, just as I will have mine. Remember, Mrs. Roberts. A promise is the easiest thing in the world to break. But it would take a greater mind than yours to keep track of all the pieces."

She wrenched herself away from the brilliant blue of his eyes. Barely able to suppress the bubble of nausea that was welling up inside, she stumbled slightly on her heel as she turned and hurried from the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

The old man was falling in and out of a fitful sleep. Images of chaos and death flickered into being behind his eyes. He could hear, faintly, the flap of the curtains as a dying breeze stole in through the open window and kicked them to and fro. Snow was muttering softly against the windowpanes, each bead making a tiny imprint in his dreams. There was the echo of a distant scream, rising, falling, rising again and taking hold of him and ripping him into a recurring nightmare. His son, standing before him, alive and well – and then *gone*, gone with a cry of pain so intense that he could feel his own skin burning as he awoke in the familiar drenching sweat of the morning.

But his room was wrapped in shadow. The darkness of the night was still thick outside. Somewhere far away, an owl hooted, its only reply the low rustle of the fire, its normal ferocity subdued by the metal grating that held it in check.

"Nathan! Nathan, let me in!"

There was a voice from the corridor outside, followed by a vicious banging that shook the door from its hinges. He groaned, rubbing an arm across his bleary eyes as he struggled to shake himself awake.

He clambered out of bed, negotiating the clutter that lined his husk of a room. Old books littered the floor, their pages crooked and bent, their covers mottled with dust. A half-empty cup of tea sat discarded on his bedside table, where the rot was already starting to settle in, the grimy liquid rippling as he steadied himself. The cup had once been shiny and new, fashioned from antique china, but it now lay chipped and cracked. Faint flickers of red and yellow crept snake-like across the wreckage.

"Nathan!"

"Please, I'm coming."

His limbs heavy with fatigue, he dragged himself across the mounting detritus. Everything had gone to ruin, his whole life, now just the tattered corpse of what he'd had before. Each day was a slow death. Thoughts would gnaw at him, questions would eat away at the few dregs of sanity he had left. But there was nothing he could do, not anymore – there was no antidote to his folly. He would wait, and the despair that crept in with each passing hour would come that little bit closer to claiming him.

He fumbled with the lock, his hands shaking. As he finally pulled back the catch, the door was pushed open and the Doctor burst into the room, his brow heavy with worry and concern.

"Nathan," he said, his words spilling out as though a dam had broken, "please just listen to me. I don't know why, and right now I don't really care. But I know you've been holding things back. Things that I *really* need to know if I'm to stop something catastrophic." He placed a hand against the man's shoulder. "Things that could help me find your son."

Nathan flinched.

“Tell me what you were trying to do.”

He stared deep into the old man’s eyes. There was nothing there but deep shadow, swathed tight around the broken soul of a man fast approaching insanity. He looked down, each breath an effort, with his weathered hands clutching spasmodically.

“I miss him so much,” he whispered, his teeth clenched together, “and I feel like I barely knew him, like he wasn’t even a part of my life. I didn’t even know my own son. And now he’s gone, and it was *my* fault, and I wish more than anything else I could take it all back, every damn hour of his life, every moment I could have spent with him. And I can’t...” He stared at the Doctor. “I miss him *so much. Please.*”

He took Nathan’s hand. The skin was like a seasoned fruit, ready to split at the first sign of pressure. “I told you I would find him. But there’s no more I can do, not until you’re straight with me. I don’t care what it is you think you’ve done. But it’s never too late to do the right thing.” He bit his lip. “What was it you were working on?”

Nathan sank down into his old leather armchair. “It *was* going to be a time machine. Honestly.” He looked up, meeting the Doctor’s steely gaze. “It was just a trifle at first, I never imagined that I might succeed. But then I discovered the time vortex, you see, and I realised it might be possible, and everything changed.”

The Doctor took a place beside him, balancing on one knee. “Go on.”

“It was Alan’s idea.”

“Your son?”

“Yes.” He broke eye contact, as though saying the name for the first time after all these weeks might be enough to seal his fate in stone.

“*What was?*”

Nathan sighed. “To alter the designs. What we’d found... it seemed to offer a whole universe of possibilities. A spatial link, between every time and every place that ever existed or ever would be. A domain of pure, untapped energy, linking the then and the now.”

“Well,” the Doctor muttered, scratching at the back of his neck, “I guess that’s as good a description of the vortex as any.”

“Alan suggested that we use it to create something even more special. I mean, we’ve all read about time machines, haven’t we? We’ve all dreamt of what it would be like. But Alan suggested something *more*. Something that would allow the mental energy of the user to interact with the fabric of time. There’d be none of the danger, you see, of transporting someone into the past or into the future. The machine could still do that via the vortex,” he insisted, growing gradually more animated, “but if our plans came to fruition, a single thought would be enough to change history.”

The Doctor stood. “I’m not surprised you failed.”

“But Alan – my son...” His expression bled desperation. “We were working one night, and he just vanished! It did work, just the once *yes*, but it *worked!*”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

He looked away, his voice trailing to a distant murmur. “Because I *know* you, remember. I knew you’d never approve.”

“*Approve?*” The Doctor threw his hands into the air. “Of course I wouldn’t! Time is sacred, Nathan – it’s not just something you can pull apart... can unravel and knit back together as you will!”

“We’d have been careful - ”

“There’s no such thing as being careful!” He was marching back and forth, each word spiked with anger.

“I thought for a moment that you’d be interested... I thought you were a scientist.”

“Then you thought wrong. You thought *very* wrong. I’ve devoted my life to upholding the laws that I believe in, and nothing, *nothing* will come between me and my duty. Not *you*, not some plea to the greater good, and certainly not some idle, scientific curiosity. And now there’s Saul, who wants control of the machine for lord ever *knows* what purpose... He’s threatened my companion, Nathan, and there’s precious little else I can do besides give him a weapon that could be used to destroy reality as we know it!” He stopped and stared at Nathan, his gaze aflame, his arms folded squarely across his chest. “Are you happy now?”

A sad smile tugged at his lips. “Look at me.”

Moments passed.

The Doctor relaxed. “I will never condone what you tried to do. The least you can do now is help me make amends. I need to get the machine working if I’m to find your son, preferably *before* Saul goes on the warpath. You can help me make some modifications, anything that we could use to stop him once he’s guaranteed my friend’s safety.”

“Doctor - ”

“No, Nathan.” He moved a step closer. “If we hurry, we can fix the machine and locate your son, all before Saul even knows what we’ve done. I don’t see any reason why he has to find out.” He smiled. “Now, will you *please* come with me?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie could feel herself melt under the warm, wet hiss of the shower. Its spidery touch murmured all over her tired body, eased each of her aching muscles into a blissful release. The stress, the worry, it all just rolled away under the silvery embrace of the water. It wrapped itself around every inch of her skin, purged every dark thought, brushed clean every last pore.

She never could keep track of time. There was a silvery sort of shine to the air, frosted by a thin rise of steam that stained the mirror with a smear of crystal. The water was hot, almost burning, but as each droplet burst into life against her skin it filled her with a wonderful sense of what it was to be alive and human. Each of her senses screamed, but she let their complaints drift away, seizing the wonderful rush of energy that plunged into her. She could stand there forever, until her body had eroded away and the water gurgled its last breath. After today of all days, she relished the heat and the wet and the cloying dampness of the air. It proved more than anything else that she was still the same person, that on the surface at least it was still the same stupid world as before.

“Cassie?”

The voice was just a ghost above the roar of the water, but it was there nonetheless. She sighed and reached out and twisted the shower handle back into the off position. The water vanished with a final hiss, and she was standing on her own in the small bathroom, the cold beginning to creep around her shoulders almost immediately.

“Sorry, I’m coming.”

She pulled a towel around herself and stepped back into her bedroom, rubbing at her straggly hair. Grae was sitting alone on her bed, thumbing through a book on philosophy that Cassie had barely opened herself. As she reached for the bundle of clothes that she’d left beside the doorway, her friend looked up at her. “Oh, hi. Sorry, I was just wondering if you were ever coming out.” She put down the book. “I thought we might go and check up on the Doctor.”

“Sure,” Cassie said, shaking the creases out of her jeans, “you never know when another alien monster might need catching.”

Grae smiled. “I’m sure we won’t have to go through all that again.”

“Thank god. Still think I’m a little young for worry lines.”

She collected her clothes and moved back into the bathroom. After wrenching the tangles out of her hair, she quickly started to dress.

As she was pulling on her sweater, there was a sudden knock on the door.

“One second!” she called.

But she heard the lock click, followed by a yelp of surprise from Grae.

Groaning in annoyance, she pushed open the bathroom door, only to see a troupe of security guards haul her friend out into the corridor.

She tried to run, but there were too many of them. They pinned her arms behind her back and dragged her from the room.

*Damn*, she thought. Being captured by the enemy? There went yet another of those tiresome movie clichés she’d always hoped to avoid.

\* \* \* \* \*

“The machine,” Elsa said. “It’s fixed.”

“It is?” Saul purred. “Excellent.” He tapped his pencil softly against the polished edge of the table.

“The Doctor’s got Mr. Sharp with him now, just to make sure everything’s how it was.”

“I see. It’s time we shut the two of them down.” He stood smoothly, and moved his chair neatly back into place underneath the table. “And since I now have his two young friends exactly where I want them, I think we have no more need to fear.”

Elsa held out her hand. “What about our deal? My husband - ”

“Will be returned to you in good time, Mrs. Roberts.” He grinned. “You don’t seem to realise, this is quite the occasion. There’s no need to be in such a hurry.” He moved in front of her, taking the lead as he pulled open the office door, his voice rising cheerfully. “We have *all* the time in the world.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor was standing in triumph over the silver hub, rubbing his hands together with glee as it began to pulse with the same energy that throbbed through the rest of the instruments. *Finally*, he thought. Everything was starting to fall into place.

“Now,” he said, looking over his shoulder towards Nathan, whose eyes were twitching in a mixture of awe and relief, “if you could show me exactly what happened the night of poor Alan’s disappearance.”

Nathan reached out for the control unit, too afraid and uncertain to break eye contact with the hub. His fingers were trembling. His lower lip was shaking silently.

There was a sudden cough from the doorway.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.”

The Doctor’s expression crumpled as he turned. There was Saul, standing by the threshold, Elsa beside him. A slight frown flickered over his forehead, but then he saw the Chancellor prod her forward with the barrel of a small, silver revolver.

“Saul,” he hissed.

“*Doctor.*” He stepped forward, adjusting his aim so that the gun hovered dangerously between the Doctor and Alan. His heavy shoes thudded against the metal. “I see you’ve fixed my machine for me. Excellent.” A smile crept onto his thin lips, and his finger tightened around the trigger. “I think we can safely terminate your employment.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” he replied, thinking quickly. “I mean, what if it breaks down again? You wouldn’t want a hasty decision to mark the end of your promising career as a megalomaniac, now, would you?”

“Sticks and stones, Doctor. I’ve heard much worse.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.”

“Please,” Nathan whispered, the colour draining from his face, “just let me find my son... It should only take a moment, then you can do what you like!”

“Ah, Mr. Sharp! How nice it is for the faculty to see you around again. Though hardly a good time for you to be making demands, considering, well, I have the gun and all.”

“*Please.*”

Saul smiled. For a moment, it looked like he would shoot them both, but then his fingers relaxed and a new calm took over. “I suppose it’s only fair for you to know the truth. You might have been a wreck of a father, but without your assistance I would never have procured myself this wonderful new time machine.”

The Doctor eyed him carefully. Elsa was standing too close – if he made a move to seize the gun from the Chancellor, all it would take to knock her down was a single wild shot. He didn’t want another death on his conscience, especially not when she was looking so terrified, her hands balled tightly into fists and her knees slightly unsteady. It didn’t look like she was holding up too well, poor woman; first impressions weren’t always everything.

“The truth, Saul?” he threw back. “What do you know about the truth?”

“Oh Doctor, so much more than you.” His smile widened. “You think you know about poor little Alan Sharp? Well, let me tell you a few things.” He jabbed the gun in the direction of the old man. “He was always something of a misfit, wasn’t he Nathan? Perhaps you wouldn’t know. But the other children never left him alone. Barely a day went by when he didn’t come home blackened and bruised. The number of times his mother must have washed blood from his clothing, asked her husband to talk to him, *cried* when he wouldn’t. And you know what Alan thought? He wished it would stop. He wished *so* hard. What he wanted more than anything else, you see, was to leave that world behind. To be powerful. To be successful. To be in a position where the riches of life were his for the taking – *his*, and his alone.”

He smiled. “And here I am.”

#### Part 4

Cassie was sitting on her hands. Her back was slumped up against the cold, hard stone of the cell wall, which was hardly the most comfortable position, but as long as she shifted every few minutes it beat lying flat against the floor. She would have expected the University to at least provide chairs.

Grae stared listlessly at the heavy iron door and wondered how long it would take the Doctor to realize that they were missing. Of course, if Saul were using the two of them to ensure his co-operation, he’d probably be aware of it already.

“You know,” Cassie said, “that thing’s not going to suddenly open if you look at it hard enough.”

Grae turned to face her. "Yes, I know."

Cassie sighed. "They never showed us this place on the tour. You ever been in one of these before?"

"Oh yes. God yes. You?"

"No. But I had a boyfriend once who liked to -" She stopped. "We have to get out of here."

Grae jumped to her feet. "Agreed."

She hurried over to the door and stared at it closely, then allowed her gaze to drift around the rest of the cell. It was quite standard really, small and dingy with a faint musty smell that crept into her nose every time she took a breath. Motes of dust drifted in endless spirals. There was no window, which meant that they were probably pretty deep inside the University. She could hear the faint hum of the generator somewhere beneath her. The Doctor had told her when they arrived that his laboratory was underground – perhaps it was nearby.

"So?"

She glanced over her shoulder at Cassie, then turned back to the lock. The brickwork was pretty solid, slightly weathered by the passage of time perhaps but still in one piece. And despite the medieval décor, the lock was electronic; there was nothing she could pick or break. Unless...

"Hey, can I have your hairclip?"

"What?"

"Your hairclip!"

Cassie rolled her eyes as she reached up and retrieved the long, metal clip from beside her ear. She handed it to Grae and gave her head a quick shake, letting her dark hair untangle and settle loose around her shoulders. Grae moved forward and, with her eyes narrowed, poked the clip into the thin space between the edge of the door and the lock. She gritted her teeth and prodded the clip around in the opening.

"You're not going to listen if I tell you that's expensive?"

"Nope."

"Right."

There was a sudden spark of electricity, followed by a loud bang, and the cell door swung slowly inwards.

"There we go." Grae smiled.

Cassie's eyes lit up. "Cool! I don't suppose I can have my hair-clip back?"

Grae nodded, and handed it back to Cassie. It was a shapeless chunk of metal, blackened and burnt.

"You should keep your hair down," she said. "It suits you."

"Erm, thanks."

Grae gave her a quick pat on the shoulder, then ushered her out into the corridor.

\* \* \* \* \*

A tomblike silence hung like a cloud over the laboratory.

Nathan staggered backwards, his arms hanging limp by his sides. His lips worked to form words that refused to emerge, that could hardly grasp the ideas they were being pressured to voice.

"Alan?" he finally croaked.

Saul nodded, seeming to take a perverse delight in every twist of confusion that wracked his elderly father. "Yes. I was Alan."

“But – But you look nothing *like* him...”

He grinned. “It’s a wonder what the people of the thirtieth century can do. Lovely place, I’d quite like to go back there sometime.” He shrugged regretfully. “Of course, that’s not going to be possible, but never mind.”

“But where have you *been*?”

“Oh, around. Here and there. Any number of places, actually, before I finally found somewhere to settle down.”

Nathan attempted a smile. “You always did like being in charge.”

Saul’s grin vanished in a flash. “Don’t tell me what I like. You don’t know me. You *never* did.” His fingers tightened instinctively around the gun. “But it looks as though you finally gave me something I wanted. After twelve years of neglect you finally did something right. Of course, it had to go and *break*. The things you gave me always did, didn’t they?”

At last the Doctor decided to intervene. “I’m sure he’s very sorry.”

“Sorry?” Saul wheeled around. “*Sorry*? You think that covers it, you think that makes everything okay?” His knuckles were bulging, his fingers a fiery red. He took a deep breath, seeking composure. “Not that it matters anymore. Not that anything much matters. Oh, I’ve known pain. But so have billions. So have we all.”

“Let me guess,” the Doctor snapped. “You want this machine purely for the benefit of others?”

Saul shook his head. “Not entirely. There are those who must suffer for the way I was treated, those who *deserve* to be punished for the indignities I was forced to deal with.” He moved towards the hub. “But I don’t quite think you’ve grasped its true potential.”

“Then *what* are you planning?”

“Our world, you see, is far from perfect.” A sad smile appeared. “It always has been, always will be. That’s the sad fact of the matter. We’d be fools to try and change things. When you think about what’s gone on before, six thousand years of murder and bloodshed, you’d be stupid to imagine a world where anything else is possible. We read the mistakes of the past, Doctor. We read them, and we repeat them.” He shrugged. “Oh, you might like to think we learn from our follies. But look all around you. I don’t see a single instance of a life that couldn’t be bettered.”

The Doctor nodded quickly. “I know, and that’s what makes my job so difficult. Don’t think I delude myself. But what’s *your* answer, hmmm? Destroy the world, make the pain go away? All rather unimaginative for a man of your supposed intellect.”

“Oh no, nothing so... *final*.” He gestured towards the machine. “I intend to strike at the root of the problem. I intend to change history.”

“Really?” Each word was prickled with a fiery scorn. “Any part of it in particular that’s not to your liking?”

“Oh, pretty much *all* of it.”

“You’re mad.”

“War. Death. Holocaust. History is steeped in the blood of those who died to move it forward. Their ancestors’ look back and say that *this* happened, and that *yes* it was good or *no* it was bad. People die so that their deaths might be written about in books, so that their lives might be shaped into statistics. We look back into our past, and we don’t see people anymore. We see facts, trends. Untold billions have died, and yet we just can’t seem to care. No wonder we live in such a sorry place. It shouldn’t happen like that.”

His voice was a knot of desperation. “Nor like this. Can’t you see that?”

“What I see, Doctor, is this. You and I, we’re not so unlike, despite what you might wish to think.” He laughed quietly. “We’d both like to see ourselves as champions of the

unfortunate. *You* merely have the benefit of being able to choose the causes you consider to be worthy of your attention. I could never live like that.”

“Maybe not. But only because of your ignorance!” His eyes burnt with frustration. “You know, I keep trying to explain to people that time doesn’t work like this. None of them listen, Saul. You’re not the first.”

“To save history? Oh, I think so.”

“History isn’t something you can save! Don’t you see? It’s something that’s alive, all around us. There might be pain, yes, but every moment is part of a whole that’s so much *greater*. If you pick and choose like this, shape it into your perfect vision, you’d be just as guilty of murder as the people you condemn for taking a step back. What about the people who’ll never get to see your version?”

“My cause,” said Saul, “is worth any cost, any sacrifice.”

“No.” His voice was suddenly cold, hard. “It isn’t. It’s worth nothing.”

“What?”

“I assume you had this University built using technology from the future. You’ve already placed the timelines under a huge strain, and you’ve barely even got started. You’re an *idiot*.”

Saul turned towards Nathan, a slow grin rising over his lips. “What do you think, *father*?”

Nathan took a deep breath. “I think you’re insane. Whatever I did to you, whatever neglect I might be guilty of, it doesn’t excuse this.”

A moment of doubt crossed Saul’s forehead.

And in that moment, the Doctor dived forward. He lunged with one hand and knocked the gun from Saul’s wavering grip, sending it skittering across the floor. Grinning with triumph, he retrieved the weapon and then leapt to his feet, staring at the man with fire in his eyes.

“I’m sorry Saul, but it looks like it’s all over.” He raised the gun suspiciously and stepped slowly away, making sure he was covering both himself and Elsa “Unless you’ve got some other tricks up your sleeve, hmmm?”

Saul moved back warily, his eyes never leaving the weapon.

“Only the one, Doctor.”

He nodded.

And Elsa drew the knife from its hiding place under her jacket and screamed in a deathly shattering of the rage cocooned inside her, and plunged the blade down towards the Doctor’s unprotected neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

The corridor was dark and dingy. Impossible shapes rose out of the darkness, creating the effect of walking through a half-formed dreamscape. A single bulb was set into the ceiling, casting a tiny circle of light that quivered and swayed across the face of the shadow. Cassie’s mouth opened in a silent *o* of surprise as she took each careful step. Just to think, far beneath all the normality that coated the surface of the University, there was a whole other world of surprises lying alone and undiscovered..

Her footsteps thudded softly against the wooden floorboards. She kept checking back over her shoulder, expecting a sudden creak to set her nerves on fire. But save for the rustle of the heavy sheets that lay draped over her surroundings, there was almost total silence.

“You think this is the right way?” she hissed, needing to say something, anything, to keep her mind from nagging at her.

“I guess so.” Grae peered ahead into the gloom. “Stop for a moment and concentrate.”

Cassie did. And then, a faint murmur through her shoes, she could feel the dull throb of power that was leading Grae towards their destination.

“The lab must be somewhere around here.”

They continued. The corridor widened out into a basement, with a stairwell on the right-hand wall leading upwards into the light. Cassie found herself moving instinctively towards it, but took a deep breath and found her frenzied heartbeat steadying. A kind of grim resignation fell over her as they advanced towards the twin metal doors that were indented into the far wall. There was a pad beside it, large enough for the span of a grow man’s hand.

“Here we go.” A smile lit up Grae’s features, and she slowly placed her palm down over the pad. There was a sharp beep, followed by a whisper of electricity as the doors slid open.

She stepped forward, her eyes adjusting to the light.

One by one, the shapes in front of her fizzled into focus.

There was the Doctor.

And there was -

She blinked.

Panic coursed through her. Behind him stood a young woman, her features creased with rage, a sharp, serrated blade clutched tightly in one hand.

“Doctor!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Grae!”

The Doctor spun around, just in time to notice Elsa’s attack. He flung up one arm, the knife brushing against his face as he locked his grip around her wrist and pushed her back. She stabbed at him, her face wild, but he snaked to one side, his mind racing as he struggled to make sense of her betrayal.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing Elsa, but – ”

“Right now,” she hissed, “I’m running on something of a one-track mind. My husband is *dead*.”

“And I’m very sorry. But what’s Saul promised you, hmmm?”

“To help me, to make it all go *away*.”

“Very nice I’m sure,” he replied, slowly backing away, his hands held out before him, “but I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that. Didn’t you hear a word I said?”

Saul clambered to his feet and pounced for the gun.

“Come on!” shouted Grae.

As Saul fired, the Doctor spun around and threw himself towards the exit. A gunshot rang out and glass shattered. Flames sprouted from the wreckage of the bench and rushed across its surface, a dizzying display of reds and yellows that glittered from the broken glass. Saul growled with anger and fired again, cursing as the shot skimmed past the Doctor’s coat and embedded itself in the wall.

“Get that man!” he shouted, his teeth ground tightly together as he ran a hand across his forehead.

More shots crackled through the air. The Doctor winced, diving forward as he felt a bullet whistle past. He landed hard on his chest, the air knocked from his bones, and

skidded across the metal floor. A second shot skimmed past his jacket, tearing through the material as though it were paper.

Elsa was standing still, her eyes flicking from left to right, panic bursting through the calm and the anger that she'd worked so hard to cultivate. She found a tear slipping down her cheek and screamed and stamped her foot. *No, not here, not now; she wasn't going to lose it after everything she'd done!*

"Doctor!" Sensing the woman's hesitation, Grae threw herself into action. A thousand beads of flame buzzed past her, flitting back and forth like tiny knives, and she lunged forward with one hand and formed a fist around the Doctor's coat.

She heaved him forward. Her forehead creased with exertion, she dragged him to his feet, tripping to one side as another bullet ricocheted from the metal. With a final effort, she wrenched him out into the corridor, his feet scrabbling for purchase on the metal as he fought to right himself. Another gunshot crackled, an inch away, but seconds too late to find its mark.

The doors slid shut, isolating the Doctor and Grae from their attackers.

Elsa looked across the laboratory, trying to repress a shudder as Saul stepped silently towards her. His face was expressionless and his eyes were dead, his fingers clenching as he marched past the rising torrents of flame, the vicious reds an impressive backdrop to his every movement.

"You tried, Mrs. Roberts," he said quietly. "You tried."

She nodded.

"You didn't think you had it in you, did you?" It was impossible not to shift beneath his glare. "But if it weren't for his friend, the Doctor would now be dead. I'd like you to remember how easy it was for you to raise that knife. You may need to do so again very soon."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Back in the sanctuary of the TARDIS, the Doctor was watching silently as the central column of the hexagonal console rose and fell with a quiet hum of power. Grae had shown Cassie to a room where the two of them could rest for a while, leaving the Doctor alone in the company of his thoughts.*

*On their way back across the University, the heavens had opened and bled thick goutts of snow. It was colder than before, heavy clumps of white that spiralled down through the darkness with a weight and conviction that bore almost no resemblance to the lighter flurries of the day. The night had almost shone under the light of the snowfall, each bead picked out with a sniper's precision by the lamps strung along each walkway. It had built up deep underfoot, making their paths treacherous, but they'd had no choice but to hurry on, the fiery cold biting at their necks and their faces, the fear of pursuit never far from their minds.*

*But no, he decided now, it wasn't likely that Saul would send anyone after them. There was hardly the need, not when the machine was in perfect order. How long would it take to fully charge? He guessed an hour at the most. And then, well, any number of things could happen. An infinity. Not a single one of which boded well for the future.*

*It seemed for a moment that he was forever working against people with good intentions. Nathan, Saul, and now even Elsa – all men and woman who were following what they believed was the best course of action. Whether for themselves or for the greater good, it didn't matter. They were all following their own logic, all working towards some sort of cause. A cause they had every reason to believe was noble.*

*Only he knew better. And it was his job to ensure that they failed.*

*People like Elsa, they loved to believe they had the monopoly on grief. Well, he thought, anger seizing him that simply wasn't true. The number of times he'd wished he could take everything back, return to life all the people who'd fallen victim to his crusades. It simply wasn't possible – not for him, not for anyone. Life went on, day by day, and there were some things you simply had to learn to live with. What right did she have, what possible right, to think that she alone deserved to have everything made perfect for her? What selfishness could be driving her?*

*He shut his eyes and rubbed at his forehead, and wished he could take it all back. This wasn't like him. The pain she must be going through, she didn't deserve his wrath.*

*And besides, he thought, a feeling of sickness welling up inside, she was doing nothing that he'd not been tempted by a thousand times in the past.*

*Perhaps that was the problem. She'd seemed so together, so fascinated by the new world he'd shown her, and now all she was doing was presenting him with a portrait of his own fallibility.*

*Well, he wasn't about to let it become reality.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa felt that she was running on adrenaline alone. There was nothing more she could do, nothing more she could have done – but if she'd just been a second swifter, the tiniest bit more resolute, she might have finished the job, and Carl might be standing beside her, and they could be going home to flowers and dinner and the comforts she'd always taken so *much* for granted.

*God*, she wanted to be sick. It couldn't be right, thinking like this, wishing she'd just committed murder. What was happening to her? She held her knife up to the light and watched as the metal glittered and rippled under the soft gold. It had come so close to being stained in the thick, rich red that must have spilled from her husband. Elsa knew she'd never had the stomach for violence. Swatting flies had never come naturally; she'd always been the one to let the insects live, to persuade her family to let them go rather than squash them. But now here she was.

She could visualise the fatal slice of the knife, feel the rage that would power the moment, taste the triumph that would flow so much faster than the blood.

A hollowness spread through her chest, choking any semblance of feeling that she'd been struggling to keep hold of. She ran a hand through her hair and let out a deep sigh. She just wanted her Carl back, wanted him to be holding her again, and why was that such a bad thing, why couldn't everything just be *right*? This world was just so harsh and cold, and she was so alone without him, and why did every single damn breath have to be killing her?

She saw Saul look up at her. He was busy over the controls, his hands a blur as he pushed and prodded at the banks of switches that surrounded the silver hub, one eye never leaving the old man who was cowering uncertainly in the far corner. Soon, she thought, she could forget all this, leave this madness behind, and things would be back the way they'd been before.

"Bear with me, Mrs. Roberts. Any moment now."

She nodded, her gaze growing ever more vacant as she continued to stare at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So...” muttered a tentative Grae. She poked her head around the door of the console room and stepped slowly inside. “How are we going to do this?”

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets and leant back against the console. “You know, I’m not entirely sure.”

“Saul doesn’t just want to change history. He wants to rewrite it in its entirety, shape it into something that he can deal with.” Her words were calm, almost accepting. “We both know that’s impossible. He’ll die trying, and probably take us all with him.” She touched the Doctor lightly on the arm. His coat was smooth and cold beneath her trailing fingers. “Please,” she continued, a note of nervousness in her voice, “you must have come up with something.”

“Well, I have an idea or two I suppose.” He brightened. “Actually...”

“Yes?”

“Of course!” He slapped himself hard on the forehead, narrowly missing his friend as he flung his elbow skywards. “The thing you managed to catch...” Inside his jacket pocket was the weapon Cassie had used earlier, which he withdrew triumphantly and placed down gently on the console. “Yes, here we are.”

“Good plan.”

“Wait a moment, I haven’t explained it yet.”

“You don’t need to, it’s obvious. I mean, if you release it, it’ll be drawn towards the anomaly, right? The anomaly that we know now to be Saul. He should be about fifteen right now, not in his thirties. And that’s not counting all the other damage he’s done. After all, he’s used the time machine to build pretty much his entire existence.”

He tapped Grae on the shoulder. “One of these days, I swear you’re going to make me redundant.”

She smiled. “I’ll go and fetch Cassie.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Saul looked up in surprise as a strange wheezing, groaning sound filled the laboratory, snapping him from his concentration.

“What the - ”

The sound subsided to a blissful silence, and a tall blue box slowly melted into being beside the doorway.

“Well I never...”

Elsa watched in bewilderment. Annoyance struggled with fear across his thick features as Saul moved away from the controls and took a tentative step towards the new arrival.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor, Cassie and Grae were monitoring Saul’s approach on the scanner.

“Are you ready?”

His companions nodded.

“Then let’s finish this.”

He brought his hand down hard on the opening mechanism and watched as the doors swung invitingly inwards.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Very impressive, Doctor.”

Saul was smiling widely as the Doctor stepped out, flanked on either side by Cassie and Grae.

“Tell me,” he said, softly rubbing his hands together, “what *do* you do for an encore?”

The Doctor grinned. “Trade secret, I’m afraid.”

“Really? Well, now. It would appear to a casual observer that you’re playing for time. A commodity that you’re rapidly running out of.” He frowned. “Of which you’re rapidly running out.”

“I think not.” He tapped Grae on the shoulder and bobbed his head in the direction of the comatose Nathan. “Take him into the TARDIS and wait for me there.” Motioning for Cassie to follow, Grae edged carefully away to the right.

“Elsa.” Saul looked back over his shoulder. “Remember what we rehearsed earlier?”

She nodded slowly, her eyes darting back and forth between the Doctor and the Chancellor.

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor said. There was genuine regret in his eyes. “I think there’s been a change to the line-up.”

Saul fixed Elsa with a penetrating stare. “*Now*, if you wouldn’t mind.”

She steeled herself for action.

But the Doctor made the first move.

He flung off his jacket, revealing a tiny silver tube that had been stored up his shirtsleeve. Quickly removing it, he pointed it in Saul’s direction and pressed the most prominent button.

Chaos erupted.

The blackness burst forth, a primal scream splitting his ears in two as it gushed at him, writhing, hissing, and its anger heavy on its breath as it plunged into him. He shrank back, throwing his hands in front of his face, but it bore down on him, slamming him into the nearest table.

An explosion rocked the hub from its mooring. Wires crashed down. Bottles shattered. Splinters of glass whisked through the air, embedding themselves into clothes and skin and metal. As Grae and Cassie pulled Nathan towards the TARDIS, he shoved them aside, his eyes widening as he watched his son being devoured by the forces that he himself had helped unleash.

“Get inside!” the Doctor snapped, wheeling back towards his companions.

Saul screamed, a wailing echo of terror ripping through him as he felt his life-force being dragged from his bones. The floor fell, a swirling mass of the darkest nothingness exploding into life in front of him, spewing shadow. He tried to run, his arms flailing out, his legs buckling beneath him, but his efforts were in vain. Coils of blackness wrapped themselves around him, pinning him back, choking him with a primeval fury until at last he fell, crumpled as a broken puppet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie’s eyes were full of horror. The view on the scanner showed the uncensored destruction as it unfurled across the ruined laboratory, a force of sheer wild abandon that was tearing all asunder in its desperate quest for vengeance.

“What now?” she whispered.

“You know,” replied Grae, hoping with all her hearts that the Doctor and Nathan would be quick enough to follow them inside. “I have no idea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We have to go,” the Doctor whispered, wiping his hands down his jacket as he moved away from the slowly smouldering corpse. “Saul is dead. Your husband too. You *know* he’ll always have a place in your mind. And believe me, it’s best the dead stay there.”

“But what about me?” Elsa’s palms were trembling. “Where will *my* place be? I *need* him.” Her pace unsteady and uncertain, she stepped back. “He doesn’t just love me, you know that? He makes me a better person. He makes me *me*. Without him,” she hissed, “I’m nothing. I *need* him to be here and to hold my hand and to make me special. Can you *know* what that feels like?” She spun away from him. “And just as long as there’s a chance of saving him...”

“Come on, Elsa. You’ve seen where meddling with time can get you, and - ”

“I’m not leaving,” she spat. “Not until you answer one question.”

“*What?*”

“One question. *Listen*,” she demanded, holding her eyes to the ceiling, watching as it cracked and crumbled. “Will you please just hurry up and *listen*.”

“*No*. This place is falling apart; you can see the chaos all around, can’t you? Screaming, bellowing. Any minute now, that chaos will break free - somewhere quite near to where you’re standing, in all probability. And it’s rather hungry. For all of this - everything created by the man who gambled with its laws and *lost*. Time doesn’t take being cheated lightly, Elsa. It never forgets.”

She levelled her gaze with his, steady before the storm. “*One question*. You said you wouldn’t hold back!”

“That wasn’t what I meant, you know that.” He flung his arms out in desperation.

“*One question*.”

“*Fine!*”

“Answer me this,” she said, finally surrendering to the anger that grappled for voice. “How do you even live with yourself?”

“I *help* people - ”

“You *help* yourself.”

“*No*. I live to make a difference.”

“You don’t get it, “ she shouted, “do you? You still just don’t get it! You think you’re a hero, a champion. Well you’re neither.”

He gripped her arm. “And you’re *wrong*. We have to go.”

Anger in her eyes, she flung him back. “You’re an impotent little clown. You’re nothing. Saul was *right*. You help the people you *choose* to help. You save the people you *choose* to save. The mission doesn’t mean anything to you. Right and wrong – they’re only *words* rattling around in that mixed up head of yours.” She made sure she was standing firm, her gaze a statue, her eyes boring into his as she spoke. “All you care about is settling the scores.”

He shook his head. “I have to believe I can make a difference.”

“Well, you *can’t*. Otherwise you couldn’t just sit back and watch as my lover died.”

He threw himself towards her. “You’re making this up. That *isn’t* what happened!”

“No?” Weaving to one side, she lashed out at him. Blood dripped from his face as he staggered back above the precipice. He could feel its pull, the seductive hiss of the temporal storms, a rising quake that rippled through his bones, whispering in his ear, dragging him down.

“I’ve lost people close. More people than you’ve even *known*. And they haunt me.”

She shook her head. “Not enough to goad you into action.”

He threw his arms wide. “What do you *want* of me?”

“I want you to do what you promised! *Help* me. Give me my life back, *please*.” Tears rustled at her eyelids. “Help this man; bring him back his son. That is what you do, right?”

“Not by cheating death!”

“You say you know loss. Then how can you *do* this to us?”

“Saul is dead. I will *not* be his legacy.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m surprised you sleep at night, all the lives you could have saved.” Her face swam with tears of blind rage. “The men you’ve turned your back on, don’t they ever ask you why?”

“Stop this.”

“*Make it stop.*”

Brushing back the bleeding hunger with a flick of his wrists, he dragged his sleeve across his torn lips and took a step toward her. Fire raged around him. The ground rumbled and the walls shook and the air screamed.

There were seconds left to make a decision.

But under his control, seconds could blossom into minutes, minutes spiral outwards into whole new worlds of hours there for the taking.

He could do it. Once.

His features fell back under a tide of calm.

“Come near me again,” he said, “and I’ll see you die alone.”

Steady in the churning chaos, he squeezed his eyes shut.

The machine sat alone on the single surviving table, beeping feebly.

His face split down the seams, twisting into a vicious snarl, and he flung himself towards the time machine as the ceiling finally caved in.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Please - ”

\* \* \* \* \*

Young Alan Sharp stared up at the sun as it completed its slow descent over the soft, purple horizon. All afternoon he’d watched it fall over the distant line of trees, the red and the gold like something liquid as they seeped out into the deepening blue of the evening sky. The heat of the day still lingered in the stonework, but the colours of the night were trickling in, and now a dark, lazy red washed over them and smeared them all into a pastel display of the most beautiful fireworks that he had ever seen. The greens were turning to brown, the browns into half-formed shadows all brushed in the orange of the sunset. It was like the perfect painting, like something he’d once seen at an exhibition with his family, pinned into the sky above his garden for him to gaze at and treasure.

A hand brushed his shoulder. He looked back, and saw his father standing behind him. It always amazed Alan, seeing the man force a smile, as though his deeply-lined face found the idea somehow alien.

“Hello son. How was your day?”

“Good thanks.” Alan shrugged. “Well, better.”

His father sat down beside him on the steps and they watched as the evening blossomed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Forgive - ”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan turned to the Doctor. All around them, chaos and fury revelled hand in hand and blood ran thick across the fractured ground, and the deathly wail of the splintered vortex bawled with a newborn rage as it burst forth through the rupturing walls.

“What about your friend?” Nathan shouted. “She’ll know what you’ve done!”

His face hardened. “Don’t worry. I’ll see she understands.”

He grasped Nathan by the arm, and together they fled towards the TARDIS.

The University vanished from the skies.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Me!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsa Roberts stepped over the threshold and let the door swing shut behind her. Kicking off her shoes and scrambling out of her coat, she moved into the hallway. It felt so warm after the cold outside, warm and rich. Her face was beaming red, and her fingers were tingling. As she advanced, she carefully took in each image: the long table against the wall, gleaming with ornaments and patterns; the wooden floorboards, shiny and smooth beneath her bare feet; the clock hanging above, its pendulum marching back and forth like the swing of a scythe. The central heating whirred softly in the background.

It was good to be home, she thought. She hadn’t been in the best of moods that morning, leaving her darling Carl cold and alone as she’d slipped out. She’d driven back along the M15, which had been bundled all evening with long lines of traffic, and now she was nearly an hour late, and dinner would probably be ruined. And still the worst thing was, he’d never think to let her apologise. It would always be somehow *his* fault, every little problem between them. One touch would always bring him round. After meeting him, she’d always found it hard not to worry if she was possibly *too* perfect for her own good.

She placed her palm against the kitchen door and gave it a gentle push. She would tell him she was sorry, make it up somehow -

On top of the kitchen table sat a beautiful glass jar. Inside the jar, a bouquet of flowers stood tall and flawless, its red and white petals rippling in the yellow loops of light that drifted down from the beaming blue ceiling.

And beside it, Carl, steam slowly rising from the cup of tea he was holding out before her.

Now, for the first time in her life, in the sights and sounds and the four walls around her, Elsa understood what he saw in her.

Maybe it was all just perfect enough.

She kissed her new husband and did not look back.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Grae froze on the threshold.*

*“You know,” she said, “when you’re just about to go into a room, and then you do, and then you forget what you were going to say?”*

*The Doctor nodded. He moved to reclaim his book.*

*A frown creased her forehead. It simmered for a moment, then settled still.*

*“Never mind.”*

**About The Author****TIM JONES**

This omnibus marks Tim's fourth submission for TDWP having previously penned, *Leaving The Red, The Things That Matter* and *The Darkest Day* (with Matt Grady). Tim also served as Editor of the Season 29 and Season 30 Omnibus. Tim is presently enrolled in university where he is studying literary arts in order to meet his desire to become a professionally published writer. Tim has the special distinction of being the youngest person to have written for TDWP. He was sixteen when "The Darkest Day" was published.